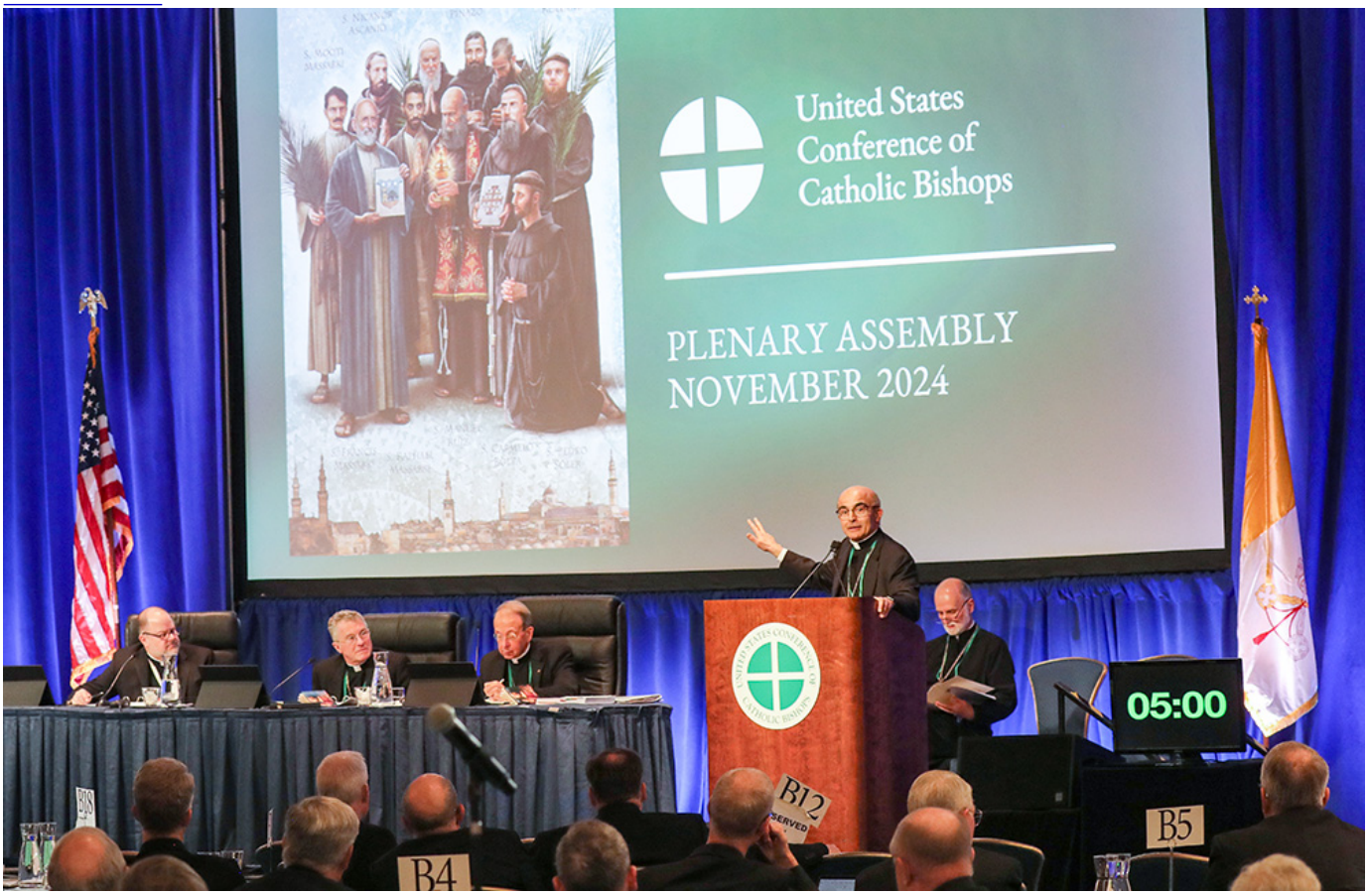
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Bishop A. Elias Zaidan, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, speaks about the upcoming 10-year anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" during a Nov. 13 session of the 2024 fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Sundays spent in nature and a return of year-round meatless Fridays for the good of the soul and the planet.

These were a few of the ideas floated Nov. 13 at the U.S. bishops' annual November assembly as ways the Catholic Church in America might mark the upcoming 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' 2015 landmark encyclical on ecology, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

The 36-minute session in Baltimore was notable not simply in what was proposed but that it took place at all.

The presentation marked the first time since November 2015 that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has included *Laudato Si*' on the public agenda of its spring or fall assemblies, a review by EarthBeat confirmed.

That brief presentation nine years ago — just months after *Laudato Si*' was issued and in the wake of Francis' first and only visit to the United States — centered on how the social encyclical's themes aligned with the work of Catholic Relief Services, the bishops' overseas development organization.

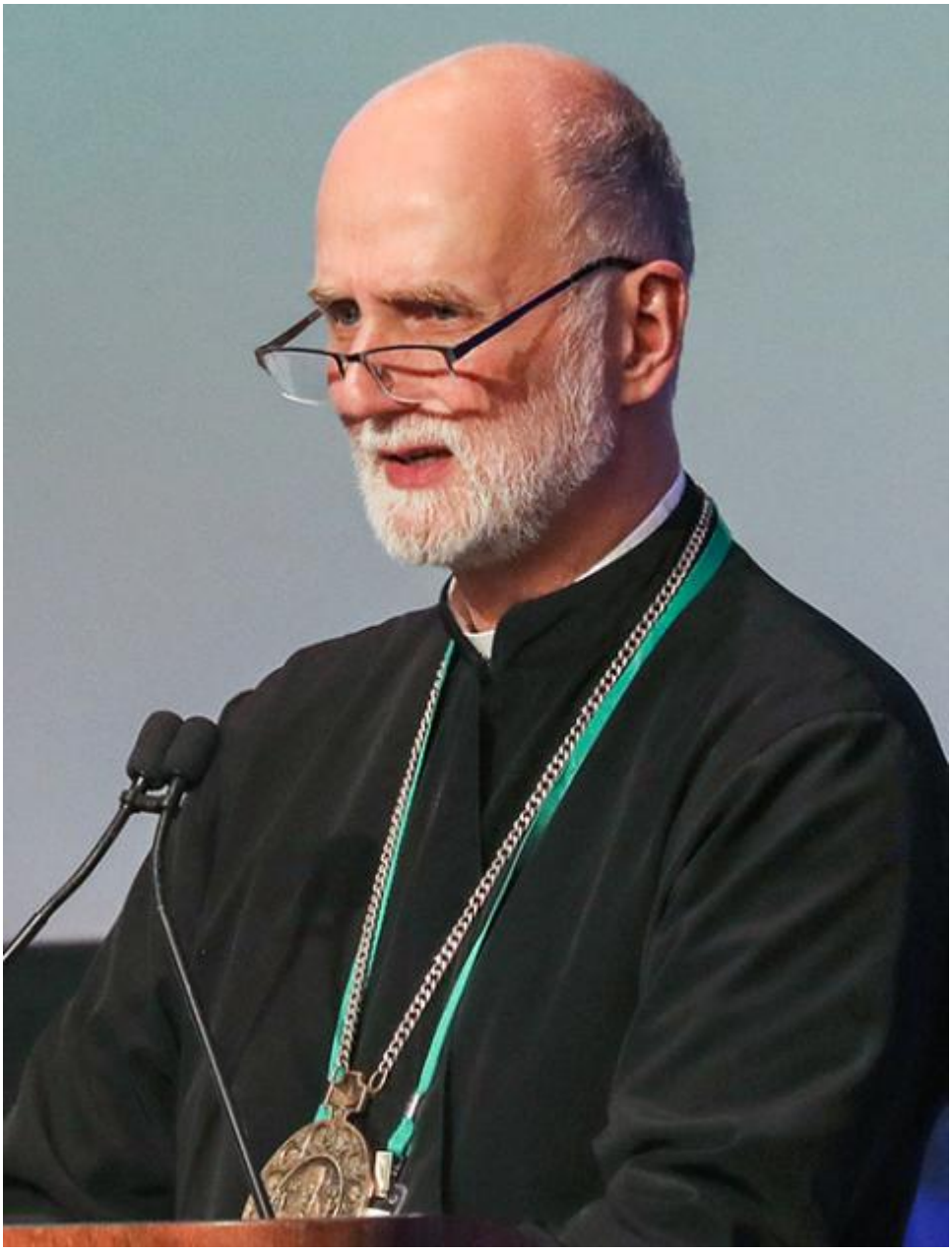
Related: Young Catholics deliver critique of US church leaders' climate silence straight to the pope

In the time since, U.S. bishops have faced persistent scrutiny that they are ignoring a central pillar of Francis' papacy — concern for the environment — during a time of increasing calamitous impacts from human-driven climate change. Some say their leadership is all the more important as pastoral shepherds of the country that leads the world in oil and gas use and production and is the largest historical source of

heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions.

A third of U.S. Catholics are aware of *Laudato Si'*, according to a March survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Around 40% of those polled believed the bishops' conference and dioceses were doing too little to address climate change, while about half said they were doing "about the right amount."

A 2021 analysis of bishops' communications revealed widespread silence on climate change. Meanwhile, nine national and regional bishops' conferences around the world have divested from fossil fuels; the Irish bishops have launched conservation efforts at the parish level and the Philippine bishops have directed the church not to accept donations from the fossil fuel industry.



Archbishop Borys Gudziak speaks during a Nov. 13 session of the U.S. bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Amid wars, political polarization and threats to life and inequality, "it can be tempting to let care for creation become less prominent," Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak, chair of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, told his brother bishops Wednesday, Nov. 13.

The archbishop, who leads the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, said the response to that thinking is found in one of the encyclical's central messages:

"Everything is connected."

"Because creation is related to everything human, our efforts around *Laudato Si*' need not be weighed down by many new programs and tasks. Rather, *Laudato Si*' can be integrated into our core mission of evangelization," especially to disaffiliated youth, Gudziak said.

The encyclical's 10-year anniversary, to be marked in May 2025, "presents for us both an important task and a great opportunity," said the archbishop.

The bishops spent 25 minutes in table conversations about ways to mark the anniversary. A follow-up discussion from the floor was cut due to time.

Before that, Gudziak proposed two ideas.

One was to use the Sabbath, whether in Mass or outside in nature, to rest amid creation. "Not to do something, but to experience something — the mystery of God's presence in the sacraments and in creation," Gudziak said.

His second suggestion was a return of Friday abstinence from meat not just in Lent but throughout the year. The U.S. bishops lifted that requirement in 1966 while still encouraging the practice.

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About 10% of U.S. emissions come from agriculture. Researchers have suggested that all U.S. Catholics refraining meat consumption on Fridays could avoid the equivalent carbon emissions from 7 million cars in a year, and save enough water to fill 8 million Olympic-size swimming pools.

"A return to Friday abstinence would be good for the soul and for the planet," Gudziak said. "Maybe for something else — uniting our devotion to the Lord and reverence for the Lord's creation."

Bishops' conference staff collected the ideas discussed at the bishops' tables for further review. The conference will also produce a report next year documenting how bishops have responded to the pope's calls in *Laudato Si*'.

Before Wednesday, references to the encyclical at the bishops' meetings were sparse, coming mainly from a few bishops in comments from the floor and in response to questions from journalists.

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At their November 2019 gathering, then-conference president Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston said the sense among his fellow prelates was that climate change was "important" but not "urgent."

Signs have recently emerged that that sentiment could be shifting, if only slightly.

To date, 27 of the 195 U.S. dioceses have enrolled in the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a multiyear Vatican initiative endorsed by Francis that provides a blueprint for how Catholic institutions at all levels can act upon the pope's calls laid out in *Laudato Si'*.

Dioceses like Atlanta, Davenport in Iowa, and San Diego are seen as leaders. Numerous dioceses have installed solar panels, undergone energy efficiency upgrades and hosted a "Green Mass."

Related: May or June: When's the anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si'?

Earlier this year, San Diego became the first U.S. diocese to make public that it has divested its financial holdings from the fossil fuel industry, the primary source of heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions.

A February gathering in San Diego of approximately 80 bishops, theologians and Catholic leaders centered on how the U.S. church can more deeply respond to the pope's calls around caring for creation. A main takeaway was that it was long overdue for the bishops' conference to make the environment a national priority.

Speaking to his fellow bishops, Bishop Elias Zaidan, chair of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, said that work to care for creation "does not require uniformity in action" and encouraged his fellow prelates to embed actions in the context of their local communities.

The bishop of the Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles, said: "As we mark the anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, we must keep the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor at the center."

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2024** feature series. View the full series.