News
EarthBeat
A man walks remains of house near water in El Bosque, Mexico.

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/Reuters/Gustavo Graf)



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June 10, 2025
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As humanity works to curtail threats to life posed by climate change, degraded ecosystems and pollution, faith communities are sounding the alarm not to overlook the original source of life that sustains billions of people and species alike — the oceans.

The moral responsibility to protect the high seas is a message that faith leaders are delivering this week in Nice, France, at the third United Nations Ocean Conference (June 9-13). The conference, referred to as UNOC3, brings together scientists, government officials and activists toward achieving the U.N. sustainable development goal on ocean conservation.

Two multifaith coalitions, collectively representing more than 150 religious and spiritual organizations, issued sibling declarations calling on countries to redouble attention, actions and financing toward the health of the oceans.

In addition to urging countries to fulfill ocean conservation targets under international pacts on climate change and biodiversity, faith groups raised deep-sea mining and industrial overfishing as growing concerns.

"The unchecked extraction and commercialization of marine resources threaten biodiversity, disrupt ecosystems, and diminish the ocean's ability to sustain life. We must restore a relationship with the ocean that is guided by respect, responsibility, and sustainability," read a declaration from Faith in the Ocean, a predominantly Catholic network of 100 organizations and 455 individuals.

Its partners include Maryknoll, Columban Missionaries, Mercy International Association, Salesian Missions, Laudato Si' Movement and Pax Christi International.



Gopal Patel, policy lead for the Faiths for UNOC3 campaign, leads a panel discussion on a multifaith declaration on ocean conservation released June 9 at the third United Nations Ocean Conference, in Nice, France. (Faiths for UNOC3)

A separate campaign, Faiths for UNOC3, has called for a moratorium on deep-sea mining and for countries to deliver on pledges under the 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework to protect and restore at least 30% of oceans, lands and freshwater by 2030. It also supports a global plastics treaty in its final stages, and ratification of the High Seas Treaty to govern waters beyond national coastlines and jurisdictions.

"The ocean, which regulates the climate and feeds billions, faces unprecedented threats. It is a moral imperative to protect and care for the ocean and the people in vulnerable situations who rely on it. Yet, when the ocean is given respect and care, it demonstrates remarkable regenerative capacity," said the Faiths for UNOC3 declaration, which was issued June 9.

The dual declarations mark a reasserted engagement by faith communities with ecological issues facing marine life.

While oceans cover two-thirds of the planet's surface, they often get less attention in international environmental deliberations than land-based conservation, said Blair Nelsen, executive director of Waterspirit, a ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, and co-leader of Faith in the Ocean.

Before departing for Nice, she said in an interview that the ocean conference is a moment to reverse that trend and put a spotlight on the water, an element considered sacred and central in core rituals in nearly every religion.

"Life arose in the ocean. It continues to produce over half of the oxygen that we breathe," Nelsen said. "We are fundamentally, whether we are living inland or living at the shore, ocean beings. And living in awareness of that interconnection can in fact open us up to the voice of God really showing us our interconnectedness and our mutual responsibility."

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The intersection of environmental crises facing the planet is on display in the oceans.

Oceans absorb 90% of the planet's excess heat trapped by greenhouse gases. As global temperatures have warmed, primarily from burning fossil fuels, so too have ocean waters, which provides fuel for stronger, faster-accelerating storms. Hotter

temperatures also melt glaciers and sea ice, which raise sea levels and pose threats for the estimated 2.86 billion people worldwide who live in island states and coastal communities, including 129 million Americans.

Municipal workers unload bags of garbage collected from the shore in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Municipal workers unload bags of garbage collected from the shore during World Oceans Day at Kali Adem Port in Jakarta, Indonesia, June 8, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Willy Kurniawan)

In addition, warmer ocean temperatures threaten coral reefs, as do overfishing and the potential expansion of deep-sea mining for tech-critical minerals. Reefs and other marine ecosystems are endangered as well by plastic pollution, with as much as 11 million metric tons of the materials — largely produced from fossil fuels — dumped annually into the waters. Microplastics have been found in the deepest parts of the oceans.

So far, countries have designated 8.3% of oceans as marine protected areas, with that total set to rise to 9.7% by 2030. That's far short of the 30% conservation target countries set at the U.N. biodiversity summit in Montreal in 2022.

In addition to urging countries to ramp up conservation efforts, faith communities have supported implementation of the High Seas Treaty, which was adopted in June 2023. Formally called the Agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction, it is the first legal instrument to safeguard marine life in international waters that make up two-thirds of oceans. It creates a process to establish marine protected areas and rules around deep-sea mining and fishing. On June 9, 18 new nations ratified the treaty, leaving the agreement — 11 short of the 60 required to enter into force.

The United States adopted the treaty but has not ratified it. Federal scientists were barred from attending the ocean conference, NPR reported. In April President Donald Trump signed an executive order encouraging deep-sea mining.

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Beyond advocacy, the faith coalitions say religious institutions can play a greater role in ocean conservation, whether mobilizing land and financial assets for conservation, lifting up the voices of vulnerable seaside communities or wielding their moral weight to bridge political, economic or scientific divides.

A report from Faiths for UNOC3, which is supported by Bloomberg Ocean Initiative, detailed some ways faith organizations are taking action to protect the deep sea. In Brazil, for example, the Pastoral da Pesca ("Fishing Pastoral"), a Catholic ministry, has worked since 1971 to protect the ocean and livelihoods of fishers, including by preserving more than 1.1 million hectares of mangrove, seaweed and floodplain habitats.

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Other religious efforts to protect the seas will be highlighted at a faith house at the conference venue. An official event June 11 will be hosted by Faith in the Ocean at Holy Trinity Episcoal Church.

The faith coalitions believe they bring not just moral clarity to conversations around the ocean, but with it local knowledge and perspectives on what's happening to oceans and communities dependent upon the seas.

"The ocean is the source of life that connects us all," Nelsen said. "And as faith-based organizations, we have not only the opportunity, but in fact, the responsibility to remind everybody what's really at stake, so that we don't slip into false solutions or slip into commodification and destruction of the ocean."