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Pope Leo XIV greets María Lía Zervino, a member of the council of the Laudato Si' Movement,

Pope Leo XIV greets María Lía Zervino, a member of the council of the Laudato Si' Movement, and Lorna Gold, executive director, after his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at The Vatican May 28, 2025. (OSV News photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media/Catholic Press Photo)



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After his general audience on a sunny late-May morning, Pope Leo XIV met with pilgrims in St. Peter's Square and was presented with a simple gift: a photo album.

The scrapbook, from members of the Laudato Si' Movement, captured a series of moments from the past decade of the work undertaken by the lay-led global Catholic network to live out Pope Francis' calls for ecological conversion and action in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

The brief encounter was symbolic as much as celebratory, as the next phase in the life of the decade-old papal letter on ecology will not be defined by Francis, but instead will rely on others across the Catholic Church, including Leo.

Francis' death in April, nearly a month before the encyclical's 10-year anniversary, left a void in the Catholic Church as well as the global environment movement.

The loss of one of the most vocal and visible champions on climate change and other ecological crises came at a critical moment for the planet. Francis died halfway through a decade scientists say is critical to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions to blunt suffering climate change, and at a moment when countries and corporations have waned in their commitments, especially in the United States.

With Francis' death has come questions about how to sustain the energy he brought to ecological issues, even as many acknowledge much remains to be done. For Catholics actively engaged in ecological work, celebrations in the last month for the encyclical — first released to the world June 18, 2015 — have been moments of resolve to continue the mission Francis imparted.



Members of the Laudato Si' Movement and others pull out weeds at the Nairobi National Park in Kenya June 4, 2022, as part of World Environment Day cleanup. (CNS/Fredrick Nzwili)

"[*Laudato Si*'] has reawakened in us this connection of humanity to the whole of nature," said Missionary Sr. Maamalifar Poreku, co-executive secretary for the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation commission for the International Union of Superiors General and Union of Superiors General, the umbrella groups for leaders of the church's women and men religious orders.

For religious and others long engaged in ecological ministries, the 10th anniversary presents a moment to renew and reenergize Catholics' commitment to a papal teaching document that Poreku describes as "important for our faith, important for society, and important in the life of the church and in political life."

"*Laudato Si*' is a legacy Pope Francis has left for the church. So something that is legacy continues without the author," she said. "Renewing our commitment is saying that we go ahead without the author of this. We go ahead. The document is very important. It's too important just to let it be, even if the author is no longer alive."

Spiritual fuel for action

When Francis issued *Laudato Si*' a decade ago, he addressed it to all people, with clear intent to catalyze a robust response to socioecological problems from the church's 1.4 billion members and the wider world.

A decade later, signs of that response are abundant. U.N. negotiators at the Paris climate summit in 2015 cited the encyclical as playing a role in pushing the long-sought climate accord to the finish line. Heads of state, legislators, environmental activists and scientists have touted Francis' words as moral grounds for actions, both taken and demanded.



Pope Francis blesses a tree during a visit to the Jesuit-run Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome Oct. 12, 2017. To the left is Jesuit Fr. Arturo Sosa, superior general of the Jesuits. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Within the church, *Laudato Si'* has unleashed waves of ecological initiatives and sustainable projects: creation care teams, new ecological curricula and academic centers, solar and energy projects, sustainable agriculture practices, reforestation efforts and much more.

In nearly every case, Catholics cited *Laudato Si'* as the spiritual fuel powering their actions. Now with Francis gone, they face the challenge of sustaining momentum around the encyclical beyond its first decade without its central protagonist.

"Ten years is just the blink of an eye in church time," Lorna Gold, Laudato Si' Movement executive director, said during a virtual UISG-USG event May 29 with women and men religious to mark the encyclical anniversary. "Our efforts can still feel like a drop in the ocean. So much remains to be done to ensure that this legacy of love and hope bequeathed to us by Pope Francis ... continues to develop in the

coming years and have a decisive impact on the world."

What role the new pope may play is still unfolding.

Gold was among the Laudato Si Movement leaders who met with Leo XIV in St. Peter's Square. She called it a "great encounter" that left her hopeful he will build upon the environmental foundation Francis left.



Pages from a scrapbook documenting environmental efforts of the past decade by the Laudato Si' Movement. The book was presented to Pope Leo XIV during his May 29 general audience in St. Peter's Square. (Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement)

In his still-early papacy, Leo has referenced *Laudato Si*' on several occasions. "It has had an extraordinary impact, inspiring countless initiatives and teaching everyone to

listen to the twofold cry of the Earth and of the poor," he said on May 25 in marking the 10-year anniversary.

Earlier in May, he encouraged participants at a Rio de Janeiro ecological gathering of 200 Catholic universities and organizations across three continents "to be builders of bridges of integration between the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula, working for ecological, social and environmental justice."

This week, he instructed the bishops of Madagascar to make care for creation "an integral part of your prophetic mission."

How one pope carries on the emphases and unfinished work of his predecessor is not a new question in the long history of the Roman Catholic Church.



The cover of the English edition of "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" (OSV News/Courtesy of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

It was Pope Paul VI, for instance, who continued the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council after Pope John XXIII died in 1963. Early in his papacy, Francis himself completed an encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, begun by Pope Benedict XVI.

For Michael Schuck, a theologian at Loyola University Chicago and author of *That They Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989*, the path forward for *Laudato Si'* might find its route in *Rerum Novarum*, the 1891 encyclical from Pope Leo XIII — Leo XIV's namesake — on labor and workers' rights that is considered the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching.

Popes after Leo XIII used the occasion of the *Rerum Novarum* anniversary to issue their own encyclicals building off its teachings in the context of their present times. Among them, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pope Pius XI, 1931), *Mater et Magistra* (Pope John XXIII, 1961) and *Centesimus Annus* (Pope John Paul II, 1991).

Schuck anticipates similar treatment by future popes to *Laudato Si'*, which he called one of the three pillars of the Catholic social tradition, alongside *Rerum Novarum* and John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem en Terris*.

"I suspect that Leo will have an encyclical or a significant document on the environment and Catholic social teaching at some point in the future. ... The document is so, so large and so impactful that Pope Leo will have to carry it forward," Schuck said.

"It's critical," he said. "We're all waiting. I think we're waiting with a lot of hope and positive expectation."

Hope from Pope Leo's history

Some of that hope draws from Leo's history, when as both Bishop and Cardinal Robert Prevost he gave attention to migration and the cares of poor people, said Christiana Zenner, a theologian at Fordham University whose book *Beyond Laudato Si'* is expected out next year.

While bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, Prevost ministered to victims of weather-related disasters and urged support of actions on climate change in person and on social media. Later as a cardinal at the Vatican, he stated the time had come to move "from words to action" on environmental crises.

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"I think many of the messages of *Laudato Si*' will, in fact, be very close to his heart and, hopefully, therefore his actions both structural and personal in the papacy," Zenner said.

"Does it help to have a leader who's on board and authorizing resources from a very wealthy institution? Absolutely. Is it necessary that that happens? No, but I think that these things will continue regardless."

A moment for Leo to lay out his own ecological vision could come later this year, when world leaders will arrive in Belém, a gateway to the Brazilian Amazon rainforest, for the next U.N. climate summit, COP30. It, too, will mark a 10-year anniversary, the adoption of the Paris Agreement.

The meeting will focus on how nations may ratchet up their self-determined climate pledges, even as they have fallen short of meeting ones already set.

Catholic organizations have eyed the Belém meeting for several years as an opportunity to wield a large presence in a host country home to the world's second-largest Catholic population. That includes the Brazilian bishops' conference and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, which Leo XIV once led. The commission co-sponsored the gathering in Rio focused on preparing for the U.N. summit.

With the significance of the summit and Leo's own ties to Latin America, many wonder whether he will go to COP30 in November, and in doing so become the first pope at a U.N. climate summit. (Illness prevented Francis from attending the Dubai summit in 2023.)

"That would be a really good signal as to how much he's going to direct his administration into environmental sustainability work," said Schuck.



One of the gardens of the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome, is seen May 29, 2025, the day Pope Leo XIV made a visit to the villa and the Borgo Laudato Si' project, which Pope Francis set up to promote ecology education. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Beyond papal attention, a number of Vatican initiatives highlight the continuing influence of *Laudato Si'*. Efforts continue toward meeting its carbon neutrality goal through moving to electric cars and constructing an agrivoltaic solar field to power the entire city-state. Another project is turning St. Peter's Basilica into a "zero-impact" space on the environment. The Borgo Laudato Si' project at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo offers visitors an integral ecology "laboratory" amid the pontifical gardens.

Whatever direction comes out of the Vatican, grassroots Catholic groups have viewed the decade milestone for *Laudato Si'* as a moment not simply for reflection on what's been achieved in the past 10 years but rededication to carry Francis' vision forward.

"We need, from time to time, to renew that commitment, and when we renew it, we kind of become conscious of what we are doing, and we again gain new energy,"

Poreku said. "Otherwise, if we leave it in a way of something that is automatic, a time will come [that] we will lose that freshness, we will lose that enthusiasm. We can get further and it falls apart."

This is Part 1 in a two-part series on the future of Laudato Si'*. Read Part 2 here.*

This story appears in the **Laudato Si' at 10: Impact on the church and world** feature series. View the full series.