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Five Years After Speaking Out on Climate Change, Pope Francis Sounds an Urgent Alarm

The encyclical 'Laudato Si' motivated many people to take action on global warming, but governments, the pope said, have lagged far behind.

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Pope Francis delivers his blessing from the window overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican during the Sunday Angelus prayer earlier this month. Credit: Filippo Monteforte/AFP/Getty

When Pope Francis issued his landmark teaching document on climate change in 2015, his words went straight to the heart of Susan

Varlamoff.

Varlamoff, 70, a biologist, read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s and speaks proudly of a Catholic faith that embraces science and calls on church members to take care of the earth. Her sister, she said, died from cancer as a child, and she wondered whether her father's liberal use of pesticides in their suburban yard might have been the cause.

She asked Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who was then the leader of 1.2 million Catholics in Atlanta and across much of Georgia, whether she could write a review for the archdiocese of the Pope's "[Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home](#) [1]," the first encyclical to be dedicated to the environment.

Instead, he asked for an action plan.

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So with her colleagues at the University of Georgia, Varlamoff wrote and illustrated a 52-page treatise on the science of climate change that offered Georgians motivated by their faith a road map for dealing with a warming earth.

The plan strengthened climate education at Catholic schools across much of the state and prompted a series of local energy audits and efficiency improvements at churches and schools. It also provided a template for climate action among Catholics nationwide.

"Slowly, we are starting to make our way and to get this information out," said Varlamoff, who has since retired. "We are exchanging best practices. There are so many Catholic scientists who desperately want to work for caring for creation. We are just moving forward with people who believe as we do."



Susan Varlamoff wrote an action plan based on Pope Francis's ecology encyclical for the Atlanta Archdiocese. Credit: Susan Varlamoff

Laudato Si' represented a seminal integration of the environment and humanity (the title is from the first words of the encyclical, "Praise be to you my Lord"). But earlier this year, Francis criticized world governments for their "very weak" response to the climate crisis. In June, he issued guidance for carrying out his climate encyclical that included calling on Catholics to divest themselves of investments in fossil fuel companies.

With this new sense of urgency, the Vatican launched a year-long program of Laudato Si' activities and put in place a new, seven-year call to action.

The encyclical broadly accepts the scientific consensus that climate change is principally a man-made phenomenon. Without prompt global action to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and slow the planet's warming, it says, there will be profound environmental, social, political and economic consequences. The pope clearly identifies the use of fossil fuels as a cause of climate change.

Yale University scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-director of the [Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology](#) [3], described the pope's commitment on climate as "unprecedented," and said it represents a "structural change" in how the world is confronting climate change and other environmental issues, such as pollution.

Science and policy have led the response to environmental concerns for decades, she said, but the pope has interjected a moral force linking people with their environment.

"It's not just social justice issues, and not just environmental issues," Tucker said. "It's the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, all coming together in various movements. The encyclical names this 'integral ecology'."

The global coronavirus pandemic, she added, "is making the linkages even more clear. You cannot have healthy people on a sick planet."

A Message for the Planet

To the world's 1.2 billion Catholics—including about 70 million in the United States—a papal encyclical is a pastoral letter that carries a special gravitas. But with Laudato Si', the pope intended it to reach everyone on the planet.

"The encyclical stands on millennia of Catholic teachings, starting with the Genesis story," said Anna Wagner, an engagement director with the five-year-old Global Catholic Climate Movement, which works with the Vatican on climate matters. "It takes ancient lessons of our faith and expresses them in a new way," she said.

Upon the encyclical's release in June, 2015, the pope took to Twitter [to declare](#) [4], bluntly: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."

At the time, scientists were warning that global warming, rising seas, and supercharged weather were no longer a distant threat. Five years later, scientists have [documented](#) [5] how climate change is intensifying droughts, wildfires and hurricanes, and [have said](#) [6] that carbon emissions need to drop 45 percent by 2030 if the world is to have a chance at fending off the worst effects of climate change.

In Laudato Si', Francis blended the latest science on climate and the loss of biological diversity with a heavy dose of economics, Catholic teaching and a call to treat all humans with dignity and respect.

"Climate change is a global problem with grave implications," he wrote, especially for the poor and in developing nations.

Rich countries are hurting poor countries, Francis wrote, calling for an economic system with "more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations."

The encyclical was seen in some camps as an attack on capitalism, and it made some Catholic Republican leaders squirm, like former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who in 2015 observed that the pope "is not a scientist."

The conservative Heartland Institute, which has long sought to undercut climate science, accused Francis of being misled by what a spokesman described as "false prophets," or the "agenda-driven bureaucrats at the United Nations."

Five years later, climate activist and journalist Bill McKibben, who has taught Sunday school in Methodist churches and has [been open](#) [7] about his own Christian faith, described the encyclical as among the most important documents of recent decades.

"It has its roots in the climate crisis, but it understands it in a much larger sense," McKibben said. "And it presages what has happened over the last four of five years as people realize that the environmental movement needs to be the environmental justice movement."

It's important, as well, McKibben said, because of the Pope's reach as a global faith leader and "arguably the most recognizable figure in the world."

The World's Response Has Been "a Source of Grave Concern"

Laudato Si' created a global buzz before and after it was published. But its impact has been mixed inside the sprawling church, a massive global institution known to move slowly.

The National Catholic Reporter, a Kansas City-based independent Catholic news outlet with dedicated climate coverage, [found](#) [8] examples around the world in which individual Catholics, parishes and institutions had responded to Laudato Si'.

Bishops in the Philippines have been fighting coal-fired power plants. American Catholic nuns and their partners in Ghana launched a plastic recycling program to reduce waste and increase employment. The U.S. Conference of Bishops, citing Laudato Si', has [opposed](#) [9] the Trump administration's rollback or repeals of key environmental regulations.

The Global Catholic Climate Movement is another example. Launched as *Laudato Si'* was released, it has grown to encompass 900 Catholic organizations in dozens of countries. The organization has spearheaded some of Catholicism's most visible climate actions, from faith-based youth climate strikes to persuading a growing number of Catholic institutions to pull their investments in fossil fuel companies.

But the National Catholic Reporter also concluded that the pope's message had not been as widely received as Francis had hoped.

"Sadly, the urgency of this ecological conversion seems not to have been grasped by international politics, where the response to the problems raised by global issues such as climate change remains very weak and a source of grave concern," the pope [told](#) [10] 180 diplomats meeting at the Vatican in January. He also [praised](#) [11] the rising voices of young people demanding urgent action on climate change.

This summer, the Vatican announced the "*Laudato Si'* Action Platform." It asks Catholics and Catholic institutions to achieve sustainability within seven years.

The Vatican itself continues to gather advice from high-level scientists and other experts in working groups, with both climate and Covid-19 in mind.

"The Vatican is pulling expertise from all over the world to chart a course for a post-Covid world," Tucker said. "This is a huge commitment."

The Importance of Catholic Divestment

Experts will argue over whether divestment campaigns actually cripple the targeted industries. But to their supporters, the campaigns hurt companies by diminishing their reputations and their access to capital, the lifeblood of any corporation.

In McKibben's mind, the Vatican's full support for divestment of fossil fuel companies is "a big deal, since the Church is a serious financial force."

Various Catholic institutions have been divesting from fossil fuel companies for several years, including the University of Dayton and Georgetown University, with the pace picking up since *Laudato Si'*, though many still have not divested, he said.

The author of more than 15 books, including *The End of Nature*, published in 1989 as an early warning about global warming, McKibben is also co-founder of the environmental group [350.org](#) [12], which has run its own divestment campaign since 2012.

The environmental group [counts](#) [13] more than 1,200 institutions and local governments and thousands of individuals representing over \$14 trillion as having pledged to divest their assets from fossil fuels, including the Episcopal church, the Church of England, and the World Council of Churches.

S&P Global, a financial information and analysis company, [has said](#) [14] the movement is gaining traction, and reported a new sense of clean-energy [optimism](#) [15] in the market.

And, the multinational oil and gas company Royal Dutch Shell in its 2019 annual report [described](#) [16] the divestment campaigns as a significant enough risk that it felt it needed to warn investors.

Divestment campaigns "could have a material adverse effect on the price of our securities and our ability to access capital markets," the company disclosed. Shell also recently [slashed](#) [17] the value of its assets by up to \$22 billion amid crashing oil prices, the global pandemic and pressure to move away from fossil fuels.

The Global Catholic Climate Movement [called](#) [18] the new divestment effort the first-ever endorsement of a fossil fuel divestment campaign to come from the full Vatican and said it followed the largest-ever announcement of divestment by faith institutions. In May 2020, 42 institutions in 14 countries announced their commitment to drop fossil fuels.

"The more that banks and fossil fuel companies and insurance companies see investment in fossil fuels is a losing strategy, the more they are going to distance themselves from fossil fuel industry projects and see them as a losing strategy in terms of finances and risk," Wagner said.

Engaging Conservative Catholics

The pope's renewed climate push this year comes as Americans face a presidential election pitting two candidates with widely divergent views on climate change. For nearly four years, President Donald Trump has taken the country in the opposite direction from the Vatican, working to withdraw the United States from the 2015 Paris climate agreement, a global action to fight climate change. Democratic challenger and former Vice President Joe Biden, [a Catholic](#) [19], has [embraced](#) [20] the encyclical, as well as a \$2 trillion clean economy jobs program and [timetable](#) [21] to achieve net-zero carbon emissions no later than 2050.

For some Catholics, Trump's fossil-fuel agenda has provided motivation to act on their own, said Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, a national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. that includes 19 U.S. Catholic partner institutions and works to incorporate the encyclical's message in education and worship. "People were saying nothing is going to happen on the national level, so we need to act at the local and state level," he said.

The encyclical has inspired actions across the country, he said. His organization has encouraged the creation of dozens of so-called Creation Care Teams to lead community action. It has started Catholic Energies, focused on solar power and energy efficiency. And it is encouraging advocacy in state capitals and Washington, D.C. "It's made a difference and it's continued to unfold," Misleh said.

The Atlanta [climate action plan](#) [22] has been or is being used as a point of reference for climate plans at the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., where Archbishop Gregory now serves, and at dioceses in Boston, Columbus, Minneapolis, San Diego and elsewhere, Misleh and other Catholic leaders said.

But they acknowledged that there have been some dioceses and parishes less willing to embrace the climate fight due to competing priorities or resistance on political grounds. The Pew Research Center [finds](#) [23] that Catholics are evenly split between Republicans and Democrats and polarized, generally.

Still, Misleh and other Catholics who are deeply concerned about climate change don't hesitate to engage Catholic conservatives who oppose abortion and reject the urgency to act on climate—a position not uncommon among Republicans.

"One cannot be concerned about the unborn and not be concerned about the world in which they are born into," said Michael Terrien, who works on climate issues with the Archdiocese of Chicago, which serves 2.2 million Catholics.

In Atlanta, the climate action plan Varmaloff helped write directly replies to the suggestion that the encyclical runs counter to business, a common refrain in the South. Business is a "noble vocation," the plan says, but it adds that Francis is asking for "is a future in which 'all people can prosper personally and economically in harmony with the gifts God has given us in nature.'"

The Atlanta Archdiocese has been able to perform or schedule energy audits on about two dozen of its 103 parishes so far. St. Mary's Catholic School in Rome, Georgia, for example, has 1,500 new energy-saving LED lights, cutting gym energy use in half, said Brian J. Savoie, the archdiocese sustainability program coordinator.

He said he has a simple message as he works with the parishes on energy efficiency: "Stop wasting, save money and fix the environmental burden."

Spending less on heating, air conditioning and lighting leaves more money to go toward social justice work, like feeding and clothing the poor, said Kat Doyle, who heads up the Laudato Si' initiative for the Atlanta Archdiocese.

"We want to tie all of this climate and energy work into how we are serving the least among us," she said. "We have to change hearts first, then we have to change minds, and then we have to change behaviors."

And, she said, Catholics must answer the question, "What does our faith call us to do?"

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[4] <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/611518771186929664>

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