Demonstrators join the People's Climate March in Washington to protest President Donald Trump's stance on the environment April 29, 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Theiler)

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Overwhelm. Hyperfixation. Confusion. Paralysis. Avoidance. Around 84% of youth globally ages 16-25 feel worried about climate change and experience negative emotions due to the reality of the climate crisis today. What happens when they start talking to each other about it?

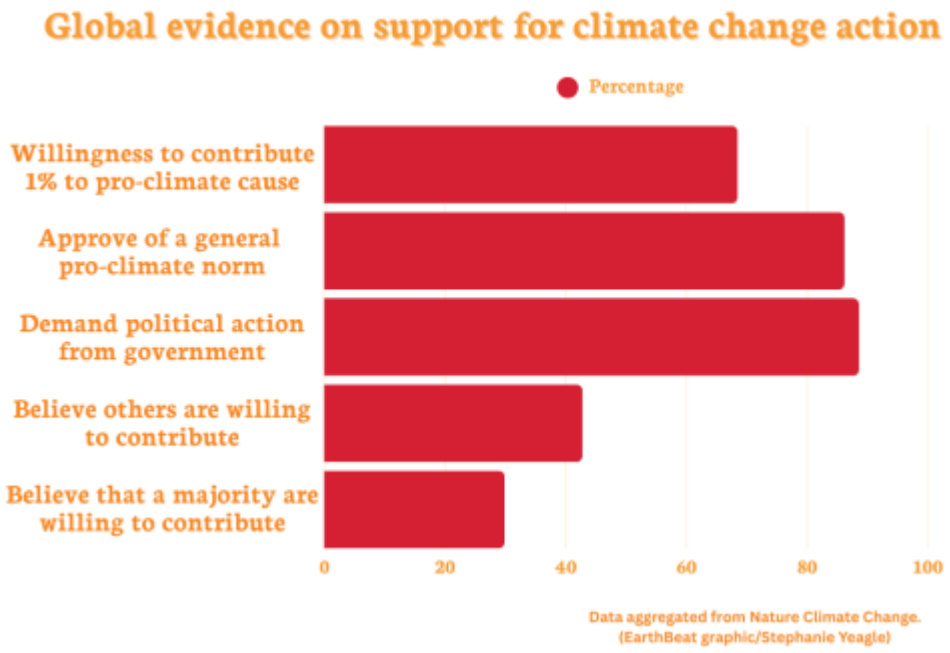
"It's easy through an environmental science lens to start to see humans as a cancerous presence on the planet," said Jesuit Br. Mark Mackey, an ecologist at Loyola University in Chicago. He thinks that idea fuels climate anxiety and other mental health issues related to ecological concern.

If young people see their identity as one of harm, "That's a bad situation," Mackey said. He noticed how overwhelming climate change is for students in his Intro to Environmental Science course. "It's multifaceted and complicated. It's big. That brings up negative emotions," he said.

Tomi Korsa, in his final year pursuing a master of divinity degree at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University in Berkeley, California, said he thinks about the climate crisis every day.

"What am I going to eat? What am I going to do with this plastic? What am I purchasing? A lot of my decisions, it's at the forefront of my mind," he said. "There are moments when I am frozen with the reality. ... This is really scary."

Mia Rao, a freshman at a large public high school in Barrington, Illinois, characterized her generation as one that tries not to take things too seriously. She worries they don't care enough about climate change because it's too frightening to care.



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"We don't know how to respond, so we respond with jokes. It could be a defense mechanism," she said, adding that if her classmates took climate change seriously, they'd have to grapple with how severe it could actually become.

Young Catholics concerned about climate change, like Korsa, Rao and Mackey's students, may feel isolated in their emotions about the issue. The U.S. population and U.S. Catholics have been less concerned about climate change — 57% of both groups view it as a serious problem, according to 2022 Pew Research. Though some subsets of Catholics are more likely to say it's serious, including 71% of Hispanic Catholics and 82% of Democrats.

Only about 32 of 195 U.S. dioceses have enrolled in the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a Vatican initiative launched by Pope Francis in 2021 to integrate the teachings of his 2015 landmark ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, throughout the Catholic Church at every level. It encourages partners to work toward seven goals, which could be expressed by adopting renewable energies, divesting from fossil fuels, and caring for the poor, among other things.

"In North America, people who have this desire to do more around creation feel pretty isolated in their parishes," said Christina Leaño, associate director for the Laudato Si' Movement, an organization founded to mobilize Catholics on climate justice. "It's pretty rare for parishes to have a creation care team, let alone a creation justice team," she said.

Those who are overwhelmed or anxious about climate change can feel worse when it seems like nobody else cares and few people — especially those in power — are doing anything about it. However, U.S. Catholics aren't actually alone in wanting more from their leaders. Between 80–89% of the world's people want more climate action from their governments, according to several studies.

What if people realized they weren't in the minority? Some young Catholics are discovering how empowering it is to work in community toward climate justice.

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A global support community

While there is meager participation from Catholic dioceses in the United States, some Catholic organizations have developed programs to help Catholics around the world feel connected to others in their faith tradition who want to better care for the Earth.

"In the U.S., we don't see it being preached from the pulpit, we don't see our bishops talking about it," said Leaño. So, people place high value on hearing personal stories from other people of faith.

That's one thing the Laudato Si' Movement's Laudato Si' Animators Program does. So far, it has connected about 15,000 people around the globe, according to Leaño, fusing prayer and contemplation with coursework on climate action.

"It gives people a lot of hope," she said.

Isaura Baptista Barros, national coordinator of Laudato Si' Movement Timor-Leste Youth Organization, said the solidarity of her community along with her faith in action have helped her. "I have often felt overwhelmed witnessing how climate change disproportionately impacts vulnerable communities in Timor-Leste."

In 2021, Tropical Cyclone Seroja triggered ravaging floods and landslides — the worst flooding in 40 years. At least 45 people died, Barros said. The damage impacted more than 30,000 households and infrastructure in the capital city of Dili and other municipalities, according to the World Bank.

Pope Francis releases a dove after a meeting with young people at a convention center in Dili, Timor-Leste, Sept. 11, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In Kenya, "women in my community walked long distances for water, while juggling their family responsibilities," said Keshoe Isaiah, a young member of the Maasai community who founded the youth-led New Lion Project. "Most of my brothers and friends had to drop out of school to migrate with livestock in search of water and pasture, leading to family separations."

"There have been moments and even recently, especially coming from a community affected by drought, nature loss and migration, where sometimes I have a deep sense of despair. Seeing elders from my Maasai community struggle to preserve cultural practices due to a changing climate, or young people losing hope as traditional livelihoods collapse — these moments weigh heavily on me," he said. "The anxiety comes not just from the scale of the crisis, but from the feeling that Indigenous voices are often excluded from decision-making tables where real change happens."

For Isaiah, too, strength comes from belonging to global communities like the Laudato Si' Animators program and the Kofi Annan Changemakers. "In those spaces, I meet others who are also grieving but building. Together, we remind each other that change doesn't come from one hero, but from collective courage," he said.

Together from despair to action

Empowered by communities of support, young U.S. Catholics find that taking action helps manage their fears. It's a common next step. Yale surveys indicate that those who are more distressed are more likely to take action. In another study, psychologists found that anger can drive climate engagement.

Yet as some engagement sees progress, and some does not, people can struggle to stay motivated and spiritually sustained. Young people and those who work with them offered some suggestions for staying connected in climate action.

Amos Kwaite, a member of the Maasai community, joins Kenyans, including members of the Laudato Si Movement, in a cleanup of Nairobi National Park June 4. 2022, as part of the observance of World Environment Day. (CNS/Fredrick Nzwili)

Korsa, the graduate student in California, joined the Catholic Climate Covenant's Common Home Corps, which trains young adults to organize climate action within their dioceses. He led a small group to write an action plan for the Oakland Diocese and request a meeting with the bishop. However, they never got one.

"It was frustrating. It was disappointing," said Korsa. Being a part of a cohort helped. "Hearing their stories about victories and frustrations and obstacles helped frame what was happening with us here in Oakland."

"We need to work together, knowing it's going to be a slow process — a grind — and to keep the perspective that we're not going to do it in six months or a year," he said. "Working as a collective is the best, most sustainable way to go about this work. We simply cannot do it all on our own."

Antonio Frietze, director of continuing education at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, also participated in the Common Home Corps. "If you are feeling powerless, one of the most empowering things you can do is build relationships," he said.

A power-mapping exercise led by Catholic Climate Covenant also helped him see where he already had relationships he could rely on. Through his position at the school, he knew people in the bishop's office, which helped him get a meeting. In July 2024, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller committed the San Antonio Archdiocese to the platform.

Frietze also understands himself through his relationship to his community both past and present, which helps him feel more grounded in what can feel like turbulent times. "The community predates the political organizations," he said.

Participants pose for a photo with Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller on Sunday, July 28, 2024, at San Fernando Cathedral when, at a liturgy, Garcia-Siller signed a commitment for the San Antonio Archdiocese to join the Laudato Si' Action Platform. (Courtesy of Catholic Climate Covenant/Diana Marin)

San Antonio was founded as a Spanish mission and colonial outpost, but, before that, the Payana people lived next to the river the Spanish called San Antonio and called their village Yanaguana, which means "sacred waters." Founded near a large spring that discharged from the Edwards Aquifer, "San Antonio would not be, without its relationship with water," said Frietze.

While the availability of safe drinking water is threatened by climate extremes such as droughts and floods, he finds some comfort and direction in the longevity of the community. "Communities can outlast states and political systems," he said.

Therefore, spend your energy close to home, he advises. "It's much more valuable to invest our lives in our loved ones and neighbors. You're going to feel your agency and autonomy in affecting your community in a more immediate way than trying to impact the national."

Awe, wonder, gratitude and hope

Sometimes despair eats away at our fundamental view of humanity and the impact of human presence on Earth. "It's often understood that we've messed up and we need to reduce ourselves and our impact on the planet," said Mackey, who also teaches an eco-spirituality course and leads a climate anxiety support group.

To address that, he draws from religion scholar Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry and environmental activist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy to ask: What might be another way to view humanity?

Mackey notes that both the anthropological and spiritual tell us more about what it means to be human. Humans can also be stewards and appreciators of beauty and nature. If climate change is going to require a transformation, it's going to need to be spiritual, too.

A participant discusses his views at a small group session during the "*Laudato Si*' and the U.S. Catholic Church" gathering at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., June 27-29, 2019. (CNS/Catholic Climate Covenant)

Mackey draws from Francis' way of framing the climate crisis in Laudato Si'. "Of course, there are problems to address," he said, but "we have an opportunity and mystery to be engaged."

He suggests practices like noticing our environment using the Examen prayer. "Take out the earbuds and notice the crunch of snow," Mackey said. Notice and be in awe and wonder.

Then turn to gratitude. "Those are the things that will counterbalance the anxiety, the pressure, the fear," he said.

"When you look at the numbers, you see the projections, or you feel the heat, go into nature," said Leaño, describing a moment on a forest therapy walk when a wild turkey encouraged her to keep going when she felt like quitting.

"Nothing that anyone can say or do can ever be a salve for the crisis, so nature in its own way of communicating has been able to provide me solace. ... I trust God's communication in all different ways and ... creation is speaking to us all the time if we are listening."

What people often want is hope — that hope, for Mackey, is in the salvation story. It's God working throughout history, being present with us on Earth, as the dying and risen Lord. Mackey remembers God's covenant with humanity.

"We aren't just left. That same God that brought us this far is still with us and won't just leave us out to dry. I have yet to find any deeper hope than that," he said.

In that grand cosmological story, we're also included, said Mackey. We have a purpose. "We work toward that ultimate hope by being co-creators with Christ," he said.

"In the story, we're taking an honest look at creation and actively pursuing justice on Earth." That's the story — one ultimately of community restoration — that can ground our climate action.

This story is part of The 89 Percent Project, an initiative of the global journalism collaboration Covering Climate Now.