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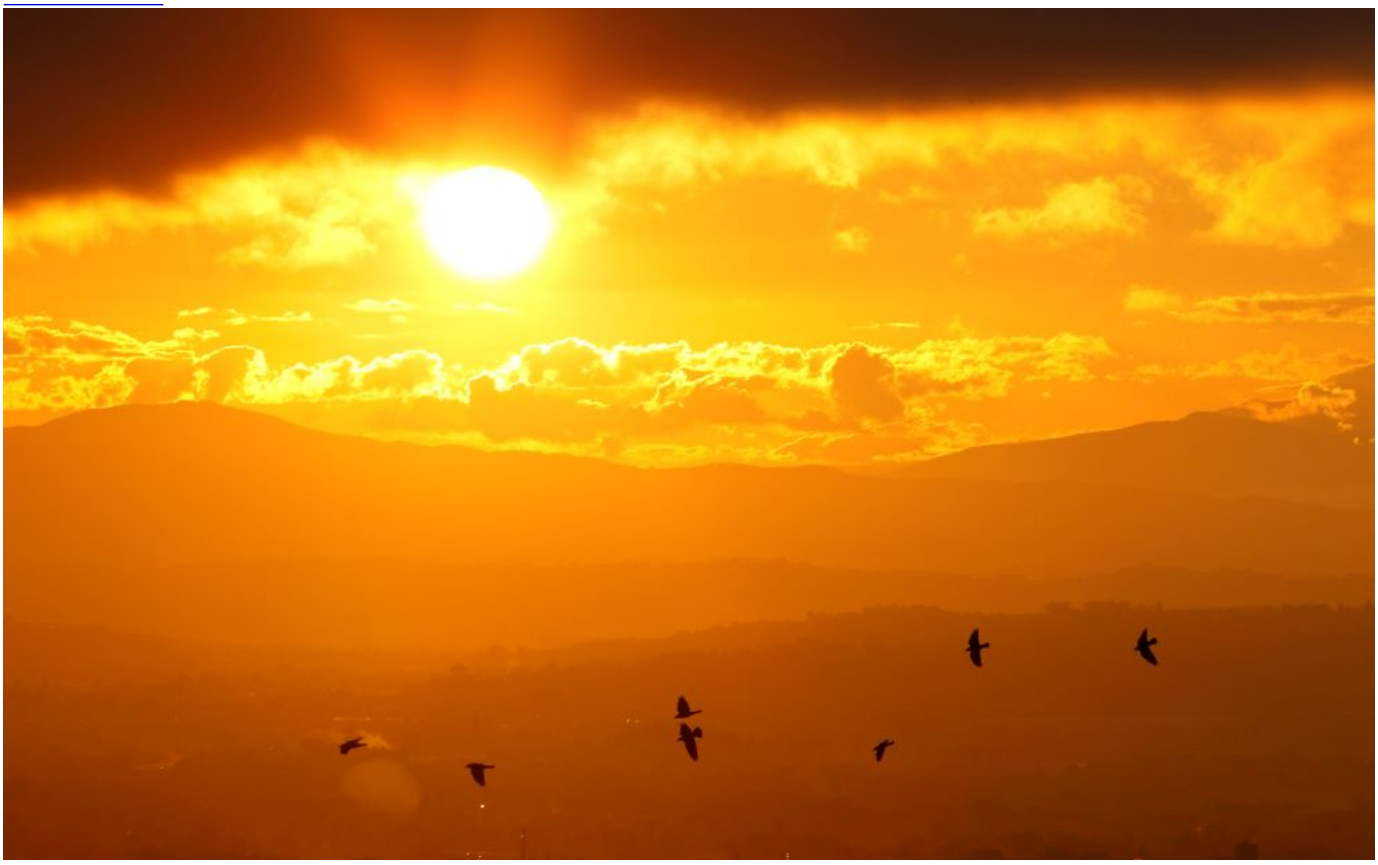

Birds fly as the sun sets over the mountains near Assisi, Italy, in this Oct. 26, 2011, file photo. St. Francis, who was born in Assisi in the 12th century, is the patron saint of ecology and his feast day is Oct. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Catholic organizations and other faith-based groups pushing for global action on climate change are celebrating Pope Francis' new apostolic exhortation on the environment, a sequel of sorts to his 2015 encyclical that some said "highlights the stark realities" of a climate crisis that only gets graver in the pontiff's view.

Unlike the pope's earlier encyclical, which offered a sweeping overview of various scientific and economic causes of climate change, the new, 12-page *Laudate Deum*, unveiled on Oct. 4 to coincide with the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, focuses on what Francis argues are the persistent failures of global governments to respond to global warming over the past eight years.

"With the passage of time, I have realized our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point," Francis writes, later noting that the world's poor are most likely to be impacted by the ravages of climate change.

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The Catholic Climate Covenant, a group dedicated to helping people "care for creation and care for the poor," lauded Francis' newest writing as timely, pointing to hurricanes and wildfires that ravaged the U.S. and other parts of the globe this summer — natural disasters scientists believe are made worse by climate change.

"Eight years ago, Pope Francis rang a clear alarm bell for humanity to wake up and protect our common home. Instead, many of us pushed the snooze button. As this summer has shown, and as Laudate Deum emphasizes, we no longer have time to spare," Jose Aguto, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, said.

"Either we wake up now, or we will doom our Common Home, our Earth, its most vulnerable inhabitants, and all future generations. For people of faith, this apostolic exhortation reminds us that to praise God we must honor his creation and give hope to the future."

Related: Pope Francis takes on climate deniers, 'irresponsible' Americans in new climate letter

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was more subdued, noting in a statement that the group's president, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, is currently participating in

the Synod on Synodality at the Vatican. The statement added that Broglio and other bishops "look forward to spending time with the exhortation in prayer and identifying ways to continue their shared witness on behalf of God's creation."

Copies of Pope Francis' latest letter on the environment, "Laudate Deum," are seen in a bookshop in Rome, Oct. 4, 2023. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

But in the introduction to *Laudate Deum*, Francis made sure to refer to a 2019 USCCB declaration on climate change, commending the American bishops for having "expressed very well" the "social meaning of our concern about climate change." The USCCB has also issued statements in support of climate-focused legislation, such as President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, and criticized Supreme Court decisions that limited the power of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

But at the individual level, U.S. bishops are better known for activism that focuses on voicing opposition to abortion and LGBTQ rights efforts, sometimes drawing fire for ignoring Francis' push for action on climate change. When Catholic Climate Covenant organized a letter to Congress in support of the Inflation Reduction Act — widely seen as the most significant climate-related legislation in U.S. history — more than 250 Catholic institutions and organizations signed on, but only nine of 176 U.S. dioceses added their name.

Although China remains the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide by a significant margin, Francis singled out the U.S. in *Laudate Deum*, arguing Western nations need to do more to reduce their emissions.

"If we consider that emissions per individual in the United States are about two times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about seven times greater than the average of the poorest countries, we can state that a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact," Francis writes.

Related: In 'Laudate Deum,' Pope Francis presents a compelling climate crisis apologia

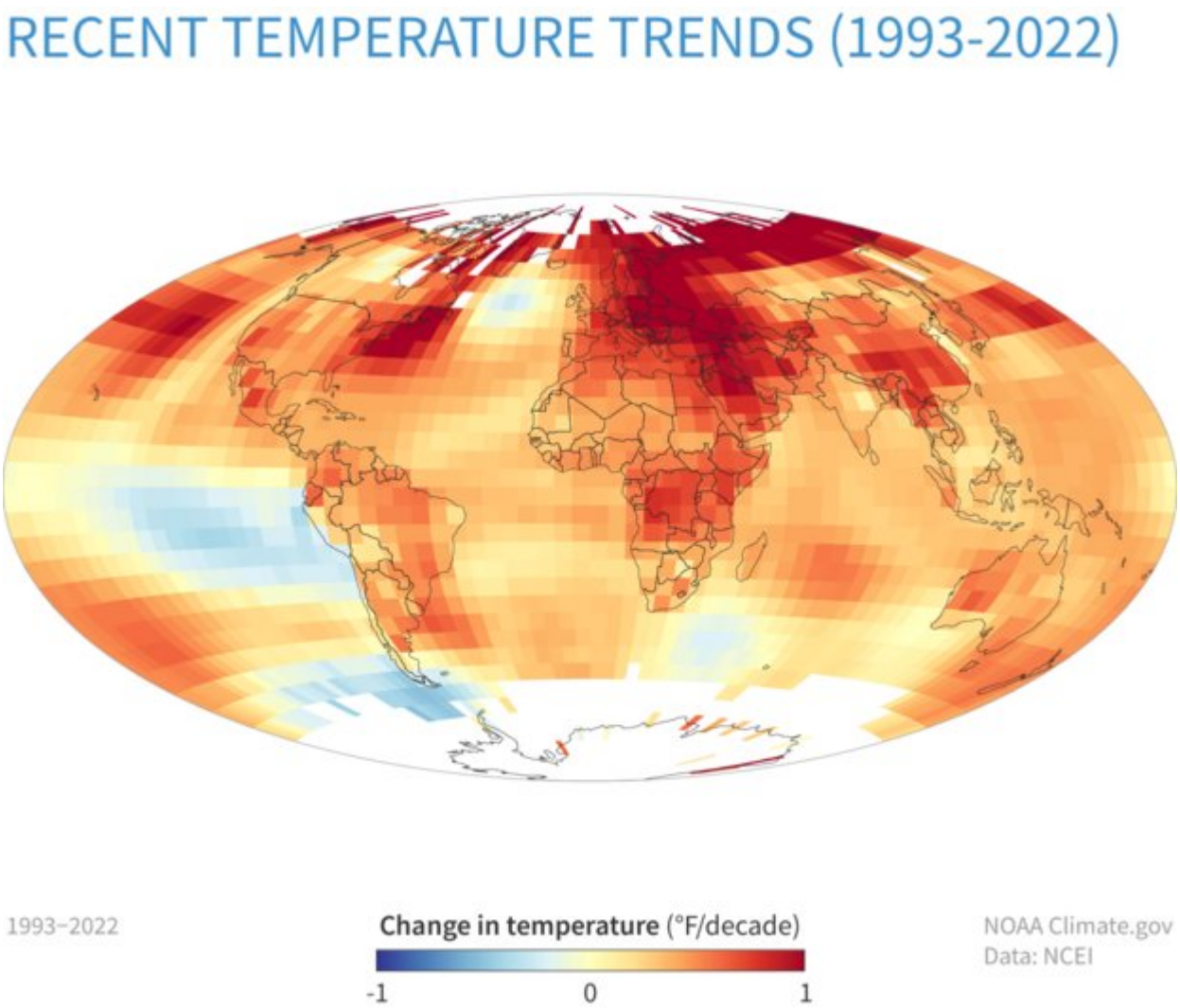
Meanwhile, U.S. Catholics overall appear to support aspects of Francis' message. A new PRRI poll released on Oct. 4 found that, among major religious subgroups, Hispanic Catholics are tied for first with the religiously unaffiliated in their willingness to say climate change is caused mostly by human activity (75% for both). White Catholics are further down the list, but a majority — 56% — still cite humans as the chief cause of climate change.

Even so, there has been relatively little movement among Catholics when it comes to Francis' view that climate change poses an immediate existential threat. Between

2014 and 2023, the number of Hispanic Catholics who view climate change as a crisis shifted from 28% to 31%, according to PRRI. Among white Catholics, the number rose from 16% to 20%.

And while the religiously unaffiliated saw the most dramatic shift in that time (33% in 2014 compared with 43% in 2023), no group in the poll reported a majority who view it as a crisis.

Catholic Relief Services, the USCCB's overseas aid agency, was more effusive in their praise of Francis' new letter. In a statement, the group said *Laudate Deum* rightly centers the plight of the vulnerable and called the document a "rallying cry for the crucial policy work needed" to blunt the impacts of climate change.



This graphic from Jan. 18, 2023, shows trends in global average surface temperature between 1993 and 2022 in degrees Fahrenheit per decade based on data from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Centers for Environmental

Information. According to the data, most of the planet is warming and only a few locations, most of them in Southern Hemisphere oceans, cooled over the time period (CNS/NOAA).

Representatives of non-Catholic groups also celebrated Francis' new letter, such as the Rev. Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power and Light, a faith-based environmental organization.

"As people of faith, we are called to care for our Sacred Earth and for our neighbors, especially those who are most vulnerable," Hendershot said in a statement. "Once again, Pope Francis helps us to recognize the connection between the economy, those who have been historically marginalized, and our Common Home. He also calls us to recognize that we are not powerless to act, and to live out our spiritual values in ways that will heal the earth and provide hope to its people everywhere."

Myal Greene, head of World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, called the document a "powerful call to look beyond traditional points of division and polarization and pursue a pathway for creation care that embraces care for our vulnerable neighbors around the world — an integral part of God's creation."

Greene was echoed by Tori Goebel, a national organizer and spokesperson for Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, who expressed hope *Laudate Deum* could help inspire evangelical leaders "to take bold, faith-rooted climate action for the health and wellbeing of God's creation and our communities."

Even so, Goebel remained optimistic.

"*Laudato Si*' has been deeply meaningful for many young evangelicals, and we are encouraged to see continued calls for action that are directly tied to our Biblical mandates to care for creation and love our neighbors," Goebel said. "*Laudate Deum* highlights the stark realities of the climate crisis and reminds us that care for our common home is directly related to justice and life itself."

Read this next: 'People of goodwill' at Vatican event respond to 'Laudate Deum'