

Late evening sun illuminates rock formations at the Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs, Colo., July 23, 2020. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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If a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, how many steps — how many journeys — does it take to save the planet?

To celebrate three occasions — the worldwide Jubilee 2025; the 10th anniversary of the 2015 release of Pope Francis' landmark environmental encyclical "*Laudato Si*'"; and the annual ecumenical Season of Creation Sept. 1-Oct. 4 — Catholics across America have committed themselves to spiritual expeditions not on the well-worn pilgrimage routes of Europe, but in their own communities.

Christening themselves "Pilgrims of Hope for Creation" — an echo of the Jubilee Year slogan "Pilgrims of Hope" — organizers say the more than 230 local treks in 35-plus states covering some 20,000 collective miles are "sacred opportunities to pray for the grace to encounter Christ in Creation and renew our relationships with God, the Earth, and one another."

A total of 22 national Catholic organizations launched Pilgrims of Hope for Creation, an initiative with the goal of making the Catholic community more aware of creation care by encouraging them to plan local pilgrimages to places of environmental beauty or ecological devastation.

"What we really wanted to do is get people to start thinking about both the beauty of the planet, and our human destruction of the planet — to begin to just appreciate both what we have, and what we may lose," said Dan Misleh, founder and executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, a nationwide network of 20 partner organizations established in 2006 with assistance from the U.S. Conference of

Catholic Bishops.

"In this way, we can build a little bit more momentum in the United States to implement — or at least pay attention to — '*Laudato Si*',' and the challenges that it presents to us. And," Misleh added, "*Laudate Deum* as well, because that certainly is a tough statement by Pope Francis."

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In *Laudate Deum* — a 2023 apostolic exhortation — Francis lamented that responses to the global climate crisis "have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing."

Misleh told OSV News he attended the Oct. 1-3 Raising Hope Conference, a gathering of faith, science and policy leaders, which reflected on the impact of "" and effective future actions. Pope Leo XIV also addressed the attendees.

"The challenges identified in '*Laudato Si*'' are in fact even more relevant today than they were 10 years ago," the pontiff remarked on Oct. 1 as the summit opened near the papal summer villa at Castel Gandolfo, 16 miles southeast of Rome. "These challenges are of a social and political nature, but first and foremost of a spiritual nature: they call for conversion."

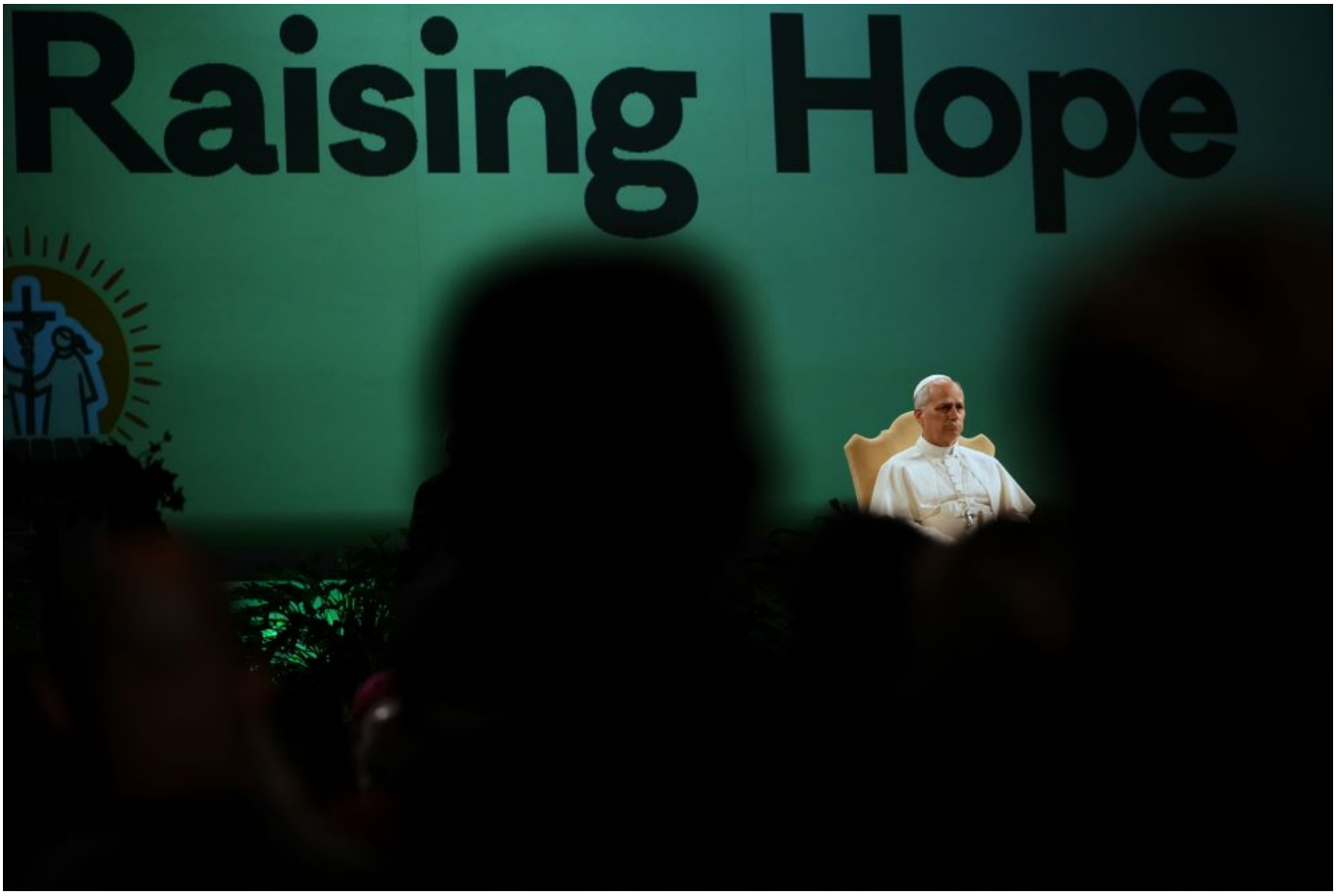
Leo also called for "pressure on governments to develop and implement more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls." He said, "Citizens need to take an active role in political decision-making at national, regional and local levels."

Misleh said that in the decade since the release of "*Laudato Si*'," there has been "both good news and bad news."

"The good news is that there's a lot more awareness of climate change," he said, "but also other environmental devastation — mostly because a lot more people are experiencing it."

A focus on lowered emissions and sources of renewable energy are also good news, but Misleh still finds "there's complacency on exactly what we're in for here."

"There needs to be a much greater awareness and action to ensure that we can pass this planet along to future generations," he said.



Pope Leo XIV, center, attends the International conference "Raising Hope for Climate Justice" in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Oct. 1. The conference marks the 10-year anniversary of "Laudato Si'," Pope Francis' landmark document that encapsulated church teaching on the environment. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

Anna Johnson, North American director of the Laudato Si' Movement — a global network of over 900 Catholic organizations and over 10,000 trained grassroots leaders — was also in Rome for the Raising Hope Conference.

"Seeing thousands of Catholics in the U.S. out on pilgrimage, journeying so many miles, reconnecting with God's gift of nature, gives all of us such hope," Johnson told OSV News. "While there are many ecological realities that are harder to face now than 10 years ago, we also have increasing opportunities for hope. We are seeing more people getting engaged with caring for our common home, and with deeper commitment."

Johnson said she sensed a renewed urgency taking root.

"It is becoming clearer what is at stake, and Catholics are stepping up in response in powerful ways, including these pilgrimages," she explained. "From over a hundred in cornfields in Indiana to a small journey through the Permian Basin, to pilgrimages along rivers in Washington and Minnesota, to the Capitol in D.C., and a site of ecological disaster in California, and so many pilgrimages in between, Catholics are showing up for our common home, bearing hope."

Three archbishops and six bishops from across the U.S. praised the Pilgrims of Hope initiative, saying it had a pivotal role in celebrating creation care and the Jubilee Year.

In San Antonio, over 70 pilgrims planned a 9-mile journey on May 24, beginning at the Woodlawn neighborhood's Little Flower Basilica and ending downtown at the San Fernando Cathedral.

To organize the Texas pilgrimage, Fr. John Suenram — a retired Carmelite priest from the basilica — worked with the Archdiocese of San Antonio's Office of Social Justice, along with the office's director, Virginia Mata, and the Texas Chapter of the Laudato Si' Movement.

"Along the way, we passed several bridges and areas where we had individuals living underneath the bridges," recalled Mata. "We provided food and sandwiches for them, but we prayed with some of them also. The kids picked up trash along the way. And so it was really putting our love into action."

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More than 50 of the 130-plus parishes in the Archdiocese of San Antonio have signed on to the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a toolkit — sponsored by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development — providing concrete resources to protect the planet.

"That's been a really remarkable story — getting that many parishes in a short time," explained Mata, "because we sent the invitation at the end of July."

For Sr. Bridget Bearss — associate director for Transformative Justice at the 1,200-member Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about 66% of the country's roughly 35,000 Catholic sisters — the LCWR's Aug. 12-15 assembly in Atlanta presented an ideal opportunity for the sisters to demonstrate their environmental commitment.

So on Aug. 14, approximately 450 sisters set out through the streets of downtown Atlanta on an "Outdoor Pilgrimage of Hope." Their 1.2 mile route included prayer, readings, and music — punctuated by periods of silence — as well as pauses at locations dedicated to the issues of forced migration, climate change and racism.

"We wanted it to be a pilgrimage done mostly in silence, but stopping to pray together and sing together," explained Bearss, a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "I think it really did what we wanted it to do — which was to invite us to be on the journey together; to bring our presence and prayer into the city of Atlanta that had so warmly welcomed us; as well as committing and recommitting to the seven themes of '*Laudato Si*'."



The Yellowstone River Lower Falls is pictured in a file photo at sunrise in Wyoming’s Yellowstone National Park. (OSV News/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

Perhaps like prophets and hermits of old, the Diocese of San Diego Creation Care Ministry— in partnership with the Diocese of San Bernardino, California — heads to the desert Nov. 14-16 for a pilgrimage highlighting the gift of the desert, the environmental challenges of the Salton Sea area, and the poverty and ecological injustice that has long plagued California's Imperial Valley.

"If you look at environmental vulnerability assessments or climate vulnerability assessments, you will see this region is really facing some of the greatest vulnerability in the country — and certainly in our state and in our diocese," said Christina Bagaglio Slentz, a former naval intelligence officer and current associate director for Creation Care at the Diocese of San Diego. "So, this question came to us. ... How do we draw attention to it?"

Accompanying the pilgrims will be a specially commissioned icon from Lviv, Ukraine, a city repeatedly attacked since the 2022 Russian invasion. While Slentz isn't sure it can yet be officially dubbed "Our Lady of the Salton Sea," the icon encompasses images of the desert, water, and mountains — the terrain of the pilgrimage.

"Not everybody can take off months and pay for a trip to Spain to walk the Camino," reflected Slentz, referring to the famous Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrimage routes in Spain dating to the ninth century. "And our faith really doesn't have to be far away. I think that's what we're really energized to embrace."