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President Joe Biden is pictured after speaking at Prince William Forest Park on Earth Day, April 22, in Triangle, Virginia. In July Biden made a nearly unprecedented decision to end his 2024 reelection campaign. (AP/Manuel Balce Ceneta)



by Brian Roewe

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Presidential elections. International environmental conferences. Weather-related disasters. What U.S. dioceses are, and aren't, doing in response nearly a decade after Pope Francis' landmark encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home."

These are just a few of the major environmental news stories that EarthBeat covered in 2024.

Whether a refresher or your first time hearing of them, here's a recap:

### **Presidential politics pave contrasting paths for US on climate, pollution**

President Joe Biden, the nation's second Catholic commander in chief, in July made a nearly unprecedented decision to end his 2024 reelection campaign. At that time, fellow Catholics [reflected on his environmental legacy](#), one largely defined by the Inflation Reduction Act's \$360-plus billion toward clean energy — the largest-ever federal investment to address climate change.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump's defeat of Vice President Kamala Harris in November [became an undercurrent to the international climate negotiations](#) in Azerbaijan. His pledges to again exit the Paris Agreement and expand oil and gas drilling left Catholic officials both from the U.S. and abroad concerned about the implications for global climate efforts at a pivotal juncture for the planet.



Delegates engage in discussions at the United States of America's pavilion during COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, Nov. 11-22. (NCR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

## **Mixed international progress on biodiversity, climate, plastic pollution**

The [climate talks in Baku, Azerbaijan](#), were one of several major environmental gatherings under the United Nations in 2024. In Colombia in October, the first biodiversity summit was held [since nations agreed to a "Paris Agreement for nature"](#) to halt and reverse the increasing trend of biodiversity loss. Meanwhile, nations convened in late November aiming to [finalize the first-ever global treaty to reduce plastic pollution](#).

The biodiversity summit [made some progress](#). The climate negotiations [set a new finance target](#) to support developing countries. And the plastic treaty talks [punted a final deal to 2025](#).

In each case, Catholic officials were on the ground tracking, advocating and reacting to the developments and what they mean for marginalized communities and the common planetary home.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, announces a net-zero initiative, pledging to reach net-zero emissions across its 59 parishes as well as schools and other institutions in the next six years. With him at a press conference April 23 are Adam Edelen (right), founder and CEO of Edelen Renewables, and Joshua Van Cleef (left), director of the diocese's peace and justice office. (Courtesy of Diocese of Lexington)

## **US bishops assess their answer to pope's ecological pleas**

The year opened with U.S. bishops gathered in San Diego with theologians and Catholic leaders [to assess U.S. progress in responding to Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical](#), "*Laudato Si'*", on Care for Our Common Home." Their assessment? The bishops have failed so far to make environmental concern a priority.

At their November assembly, the bishops [discussed \*Laudato Si'\* for the first time](#) in nearly a decade. A [March survey](#) found roughly a third of U.S. Catholics are aware of *Laudato Si'*, while nearly three-in-four believed environmental justice was worth urgent attention.

Meanwhile, more signs of the U.S. church responding to the pope's calls for action emerged in 2024. Among them, the [San Diego Diocese](#) becoming the first in the country to make public its divestment from fossil fuels, [bishops in Washington state](#) supported Indigenous efforts to remove a dam, and in the [Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky](#), in the heart of coal country, Bishop John Stowe set an ambitious goal for the diocese to achieve net-zero emissions by 2030.



Marie Cook reacts to the damage to her home in Wellington, Fla., Oct. 10, 2024, after a tornado formed by Hurricane Milton touched down striking homes in the neighborhood and surrounding area. (OSV News photo/Bill Ingram/Palm Beach Post/USA Today Network via Reuters)

## **Weather-related disasters strike at home, abroad**

2024 was another year of extreme weather disasters, many of which reflecting the types of scenarios scientists have predicted as global temperatures rise.

A [historic drought](#) in parts of Africa. Severe [heat waves](#) across the map. [Landslides in India](#). Major flooding across the globe, including in [Spain](#) and [France](#), at one point temporarily closing access to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes.

In the U.S., the back-to-back hurricanes [Helene](#) and [Milton battered the South](#).



Some of the young people of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, during an Aug. 30 outing to the Buttonhook Forest property in Chappaqua, New York. The visit of young people was shepherded by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, whose sponsored ministry, the Center at Mariandale, hosted the visitors. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

**Sisters confront land justice with Native tribes**

Near the end of summer, the Dominican Sisters of Hope hosted a special group of visitors to their lands near Ossining, New York: members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin, whose ancestral lands include those now owned by the Dominican sisters.

The [encounter is one of numerous efforts by Catholic sisters to begin dialogues with Native tribes about racial and ecological justice](#) when it comes to the lands owned by Catholic congregations.

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## **10 most-read EarthBeat news articles**

### **[1. Catholics among key backers of SCOTUS ruling that threatens environmental rules](#)**

By Katie Collins Scott

Conservative Catholics who supported the U.S. Supreme Court striking down the 40-year precedent Chevron deference, used regularly by federal agencies to interpret environmental and other laws, cited agency overreach and religious freedom. But others said the ruling undermines the common good and Catholic social teaching.

### **[2. Saving the Earth requires new images of God, says feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson](#)**

By Heidi Schlumpf

In a new book of meditations on God and the Earth, feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson explores an image of God as lover of creation and concludes that, yes, you will see your pet in heaven.

### **[3. In Asheville, North Carolina, priests try to serve amid Helene's devastation](#)**

By Barb Frazee

After Hurricane Helene hit in North Carolina, priests were called on for practical and spiritual help as the region was without electricity, water or telecommunications, and crews were gradually clearing roads.

#### **4. In the Philippines, Catholic priests tackle plastic waste brick by brick**

By Brian Roewe

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart build bricks from discarded plastic bottles. It's one way people and communities across the world are addressing the gargantuan problem of plastic waste and plastic pollution.

#### **5. Sen. Tim Kaine on the spirituality of walking, cycling, paddling**

By Heidi Schlumpf

After a grueling vice presidential race in 2016, the Catholic lawmaker completed a three-year hiking, cycling and canoeing "triathlon." He shares some reflections on politics, the environment and faith with EarthBeat.

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#### **6. In CBS interview, Francis calls climate change 'a road to death,' chastises 'foolish' deniers**

By Brian Roewe

Climate change presents the world with "a road to death," Pope Francis said in a CBS interview. He affirmed that protecting the planet is a top global priority and chastised global warming deniers as "foolish people."

#### **7. Zimbabwe diocese rebuilds dam in response to climate change, water scarcity**

By Marko Phiri

The Diocese of Gweru has responded to the Zimbabwe government's call for more irrigated lands by reconstructing a dam in the country's low rainfall Midlands province to revive agriculture projects there.

#### **8. In first for US church, San Diego Diocese divests from fossil fuels**

By Brian Roewe



The San Diego Diocese has divested its financial holdings from the fossil fuel industry, the first Catholic diocese in the U.S. to make public such a move in response to Pope Francis' calls to address climate change.

### **9. [Lexington Diocese, in heart of coal country, commits to net-zero emissions](#)**

By Brian Roewe

The Lexington Diocese's commitment to net-zero carbon emissions is one of the boldest responses to climate change to date from the U.S. Catholic Church — and it comes from coal country.

### **10. [US church failing on pope's climate goals, bishops say at private conference](#)**

By Christopher White

Eighty bishops, theologians and other Catholic leaders gathered Feb. 22-23 to reckon with what was described as the failure of the U.S. church to implement the pope's environmental teachings.

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## **5 most-read EarthBeat commentaries**

### **1. [With the red heifer ceremony, God purifies the people through the earth](#)**

By Damian Costello

The red heifer has been in the news, with rumors that the ancient ceremony from Scripture will be revived. Like the wild ox, this sacrifice emphasizes power and life, and works to restore wholeness to the community.

### **2. [Jim Jordan's attack on Catholic groups' ethical investing](#)**

By Steven P. Millies

The House Judiciary Committee not only papered investment firms with document preservation letters, but they also set their sights on several Catholic ministries and religious communities guided by church teachings to assess economic activities with safeguarding the environment.

### **3. 3 female saints teach that Earth is our common mother and home**

By Mickey McGrath

I have taken a fresh look at our concept of the Earth as humanity's common mother and home. Some of my favorite women saints have inspired me with new levels of awareness and understanding.

### **4. Three Catholic bishops and a nun walk into the White House. Here's why it's no joke**

By Archbishop John Wester

The head of the Diocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico, offers insight into the November 2023 Catholic visit to the White House, in an effort to act on Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* by pursuing stronger Environmental Protection Agency standards for high-emitting pollutants contributing to climate change.

### **5. Beware of false prophets**

By Fr. Thomas Reese

False prophets tell us that global warming will not happen, microplastics do not cause cancer, guns will protect us, and the poor need to suffer to motivate them to work.