



The inaugural Pope Leo XIV Sustainability Medal, which the pope himself will present at Castel Gandolfo in October during the 2026 Villanova International Sustainability Conference in Rome. (OSV News/Courtesy of Villanova University)



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A new award created by Villanova University, named after its most famous — and only papal — alumnus, will recognize extraordinary efforts in caring for the Earth and the common good.

The Pope Leo XIV Sustainability Medal will honor individuals across the globe who have displayed extraordinary leadership in the areas of ecological responsibility, ethics and integral human development.

"The Medal seeks to honor those whose work demonstrates a holistic vision of sustainability, integrating care for the environment, social justice, concern for vulnerable populations, and responsible stewardship of economic and natural resources," states a July 20 [press release](#) announcing the award.

Leo, a 1977 Villanova graduate with a bachelor's degree in mathematics, has placed particular attention on ecology and environmental matters so far in his 14-month-old papacy. He has overseen Vatican initiatives to [build a massive solar farm](#) and [issue a special liturgy for creation](#), while [pressing world leaders to act swiftly in addressing climate change](#) by meeting the Paris Agreement goal to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

"The creation is crying out in floods, droughts, storms and relentless heat," Leo said in a message to the [COP30 United Nations climate summit](#) in November 2025. "One in three people live in great vulnerability because of these climate changes. To them, climate change is not a distant threat, and to ignore these people is to deny our shared humanity."

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The first U.S.-born pope is set to present the inaugural medal bearing his name at an international sustainability conference hosted by Villanova in October in Rome. The winner, who will be announced in September, was selected through an evaluation process of nominees by the university sustainability leadership council. Future recommendations can be directed to Villanova's Office of Sustainability.

The Augustinian university outside Philadelphia plans to award the medal every two years at its sustainability conference, which was first held in 2024. The medal differs

from other environmental awards, the school said, by evaluating "integral ecology over pure technical metrics, prioritizing the ethical mandate of caring for the marginalized and bridging the gap between rigorous science and moral conviction."

"Care for our common home and care for one another are inseparable," Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova University president, said in the press release. "By recognizing leaders whose work advances both environmental stewardship and the common good, we hope to inspire meaningful and lasting impact in communities around the world."

The 2026 Villanova sustainability conference, set for Oct. 12-15, is focused on "Responding to the Cries of the Earth and the Poor" — a reference to an oft-cited passage from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" and one of the thematic goals of the Vatican's [Laudato Si' Action Platform](#).

The conference website points to the [2025 State of the Climate Report](#) from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and from Oregon State University. The report concluded that "the planet's vital signs are flashing red" with 22 of 34 key indicators of planetary health at record levels. [Each of the past 11 years all rank as the hottest on record](#).

Along with *Laudato Si'*, the conference highlights Leo's apostolic exhortation [Dilexi Te](#) on poor and marginalized communities and Francis' exhortation [Laudate Deum](#) "on the climate crisis."

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Approximately 300 people are expected to attend, including church representatives, academics and leaders from the private and public sectors, across fields of science, theology, nursing, business and the humanities. The conference will explore areas related to ecology, religion, economics, health, international development, migration and artificial intelligence. It is being developed with the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and the *Laudato Si'* Center for Higher Education.

The conference will take place at both the "Augustinianum" Institute for Patristic Studies near St. Peter's Square, with portions, including the Pope Leo medal ceremony, at [Borgo Laudato Si'](#) — the ecological sustainability education center at

Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence outside Rome.

A year ago, Leo attended a gathering there where Catholic leaders on environmental issues marked a decade since *Laudato Si'* was issued. The pope urged a [greater emphasis on heart over mind](#) to move more people on socio-environmental concerns like climate change.

"It is only by returning to the heart that a true ecological conversion can take place. We must shift from collecting data to caring, and from environmental discourse to an ecological conversion that transforms both personal and communal lifestyles," Leo said.

Villanova becomes the latest U.S. Catholic university to situate an environmental conference at Borgo Laudato Si'. In March, the University of Notre Dame partnered with the integral human development dicastery to launch the [Global Alliance for Laudato Si'](#) to apply Catholic principles toward solutions to ecological crises, including climate change.

Since 2007, Villanova leadership has committed the university to respond to climate change. In 2018, it finalized a 10-year sustainability plan. To support those efforts, it has also enrolled in the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform.

The Pope Leo XIV Sustainability Medal joins other environmental honors like the Earthshot Prize (ecological solutions) and the Goldman Environmental Prize, often called the "Nobel Prize" for the environment that is presented annually to grassroots environmental leaders across six continents.

Recent winners of the Goldman Prize for North America include several Catholics, notably [Sharon Lavigne](#) (2021) for her efforts to halt petrochemical development in southern Louisiana, and Nalleli Cobo (2022) for work to shutter an urban oil drilling facility, [leased from the Los Angeles Archdiocese](#), in her neighborhood.