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Headline: Catholics mobilize for Pope's encyclical on climate change

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In this Wednesday, May 29, 2013, file photo, Pope Francis arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican through a throng of people carrying umbrellas for the rain. Francis is issuing an encyclical on the environment and climate change by the end of June 2015 with an eye toward the end-of-year UN climate change conference in Paris. AP PHOTO/ANDREW MEDICHINI

In this Wednesday, May 29, 2013, file photo, Pope Francis arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican through a throng of people carrying umbrellas for the rain. Francis is issuing an encyclical on the environment and climate change by the end of June 2015 with an eye toward the end-of-year UN climate change conference in Paris. AP PHOTO/ANDREW MEDICHINI

NEW YORK—There will be prayer vigils and pilgrimages, policy briefings and seminars, and sermons in parishes from the United States to the Philippines.

When Pope Francis releases his much-anticipated teaching document on the environment and climate change in the coming weeks, a network of Roman Catholics will be ready.

These environmental advocates—who work with bishops, religious orders, Catholic universities and lay movements—have been preparing for months to help maximize the effect of the statement, hoping for a transformative impact in the fight against global warming.

"This is such a powerful moment," said Patrick Carolan, executive director of Franciscan Action Network, a Washington-based advocacy group formed by Franciscan religious orders.

"We're asking ourselves, 'What would be the best way for us to support the faith community in getting this out and using it as a call to action?'" Carolan said.

Francis is issuing the encyclical by the end of June with an eye toward the end-of-year United Nations climate change conference in Paris.

While previous Popes have made strong moral and theological arguments in favor of environmental protection, Francis will be the first to address global warming in such a high-level teaching document.

The Pope, who will address the UN General Assembly on Sept. 25 when he visits the United States, has said he wants the encyclical to be released in time to be read and absorbed before the Paris talks.

Call to action

Advocates are pressing for a binding, comprehensive agreement among nations to curb rising global temperatures, which scientists say are largely driven by carbon emissions.

"People are really putting a lot of weight on this," said Nancy Tuchman, director of the Institute of Environmental Sustainability at Loyola University Chicago.

"I think the real hope is that he says it like it is and tells us there has to be a call to action and it has to be immediate," Tuchman added.

The institute, which has been working to unite 28 US Jesuit colleges and universities as a common voice on climate change, plans to collect papers from students, faculty and staff with their reflections on the document and how they can be "one of its champions," she said.

Carolán was among about 40 Catholic leaders who gathered in Rome this month for a strategy meeting organized by the Global Catholic Climate Movement, a network that he cofounded that includes organizations representing religious orders, Church aid agencies, Catholic social justice advocates and others.

Skeptics

The movement started a petition that urges political leaders to take action to curb global warming and plans a prayer vigil in Washington the night before Francis' Sept. 24 address to the US Congress, where he is likely to touch on environmental protection.

The Pope's audience at the Capitol will include skeptics on climate change, and like-minded groups are preparing a response to the encyclical.

The Heartland Institute, a conservative Chicago-based think-tank that sent a team to Rome last month to warn the Pope against the UN climate change agenda, says it is building relationships with Catholic leaders and planning to distribute reports on sustainable development and challenges to climate science to a Catholic audience.

Jim Lakely, a Heartland spokesman, said that since the Rome event, the institute had heard from Catholic groups, bloggers and others "who share our concern that the Pope is being misadvised by the United Nations on this complicated scientific issue."

At the same time, however, other Catholics worldwide are mobilizing to echo the Pope's words among the faithful.

Ring of bells

Catholic Earthcare Australia, the ecology agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, plans an event on the encyclical at the Australian Parliament and will publish a book on the encyclical for use in parishes.

In the Philippines, the Archdiocese of Manila's decade-old ecology ministry is asking bishops to encourage all parishes to ring their church bells when the encyclical is released, among other efforts to highlight the Pope's statement, said ministry director Lou Arsenio.

Each September, the Manila ecology ministry holds a month of liturgies and Church activities on environmental protection called a "Season of Creation."

"The big issue here is that environmental issues are not just about science but about ethics and moral values," said Pablo Canziani, an atmospheric physicist who works with the Argentine bishops' conference.

Canziani, who worked with then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires before he became Pope Francis, recently led a two-day environmental seminar organized for Argentine diocesan priests.

Canziani said he and others also hoped to incorporate prayers related to the encyclical in the many upcoming Argentine pilgrimages to shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Model sermons

In the United States, Dan Misleh, director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, an education and advocacy network that works with the US bishops, is preparing model sermons on the expected themes of the encyclical.

Over the last 15 years or so, Catholic and other faith traditions have been increasingly taking up environmental protection, or what they call creation care, as a moral issue, emphasizing the impact not only on nature but also on poor people who struggle for access to clean water and farmable land and are often the most vulnerable in natural disasters.

However, theologians and secular environmental activists say this stunningly popular Pope, who has captured the world's attention, can bring into focus the human toll from climate change in a way few other leaders can.

"The social justice aspect, and the way climate change is going to affect the poor and underprivileged and less privileged—that's not the first thing people think about when they think about climate change," said Lou Leonard, a World Wildlife Fund vice president who specializes in climate change issues.

Unparalleled network

"For those who see this primarily as an issue of polar bears or other impact on species—which is all really important—this is an opportunity to say this is as much a human issue as anything else," Leonard added.

The Church, given its reach and structure, also provides an unparalleled network for amplifying calls to reduce global warming.

Bishops' conferences in many countries, including in the United States, have social justice programs that focus on the environment.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, head of the US bishops' domestic justice and human development committee, speaks frequently about Catholic teaching on preserving creation and the impact of climate change on the poor.

Global warming has also emerged as an issue for Caritas International, a confederation of Catholic charitable groups that play a major role in development and disaster relief in more than 160 countries.

Caritas leaders worldwide said in a survey released this month that climate change was a top contributor to food insecurity.

Major environmental organizations are also abuzz about the encyclical and have been contacting Catholic groups for guidance. Misleh has cautioned the groups that the Pope will be making a theological statement and speaking "as a Catholic, not a member of the Sierra Club."

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