

Headline: Climate crisis and religious environmentalism

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Religious actors have been animating the religious community and the larger society for decades now. Over the recent years, a growing number of religious leaders and groups have responded to issues and problems about the environment and natural resources.

No less than the Catholic Church's head, Pope Francis, released his trailblazing encyclical about the environment and social justice, "Praise Be to You—Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home" in 2015. In the Philippines, where the majority are Catholics, this encyclical has inspired many Catholic religious leaders and organizations, resulting in generating bolder environmental enthusiasm or promoting "ecological citizenship" by integrating care for creation with their pastoral duties, supporting environmental groups, and/or engaging in the climate discourse at various levels. Other sectors of Philippine civil society recognize the strategic importance of involving the church in environmental campaigns and advocacies. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) manifested a significantly improved religious environmentalism inspired by "Laudato Si'" by issuing important pastoral statements and creating the inter-commission for the National Laudato Si' Program. "Laudato Si'" has also resulted in interfaith conversations. The Third Interfaith Dialogue on Creating a Climate-Resilient Nation through Empowerment of communities and religious group was held last Nov. 23. For the first time, the Climate Change Commission co-organized this interfaith dialogue with Living Laudato Si' Philippines and the Aksyon Klima Pilipinas network. Representatives from the Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, Islam, Iglesia Filipinas Independencia, and indigenous peoples signed a manifesto calling for a paradigm shift and immediate action during the 28th Conference of Parties (COP) for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Important interfaith conversations about climate change were also held at the international level these past few years. Former UNFCCC executive secretary Christiana Figueres observed that during COP21: "The Pope's encyclical, along with mobilisation by many other faith groups across the globe, provided a clear moral imperative for taking climate action, supporting the Paris Climate Change Agreement ..." With the hope of influencing COP28, a Global Faith Leaders Summit on Climate Change occurred in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) last Nov. 6-7. This gathering of leaders from different religions and indigenous traditions was very timely and strategic given UNFCCC COP28's venue in Dubai, UAE. This year, a Faith Pavilion was set up for the first time in the history of UN conferences on climate change. This themed pavilion was hosted by the Muslim Council of Elders in collaboration with the COP28 presidency, the United Nations Environment Programme, and various coalitions of global partners. Pope Francis also signed their interfaith statement. Guided by "Laudato Si'" and "Laudate Deum," the global Catholic letter addressed to the COP28 presidency was signed by the Laudato Si Movement and other organizations.

Inspired by his heartfelt concerns for our planet and moved by a great sense of urgency, Pope Francis wrote "Laudate Deum," (translated as "Praise God," which is the title of his apostolic exhortation issued on Oct. 4, 2023, Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi). This papal document which provides a brief critical discussion about the global climate emergency serves as an important sequel to his encyclical, "Laudato Si'." Pope Francis called for a reconfiguration or recreation of multilateralism or "a way of togetherness" that addresses the climate crisis and considers the voices of those from "below" (the vulnerable sectors). In his address to COP28, Pope Francis challenged: "It is up to this generation to heed the cry of peoples, the young and children, and to lay the foundations of a new multilateralism."

Filipino church leaders such as Bishop Gerry Alminaza, the first CBCP official delegate to the UNFCCC's COP (chair of the National Laudato Si' Program), and Fr. Edwin Gariguez (Goldman Environmental Prize awardee) joined the clamor for a stronger decision against fossil fuels to be stated on the COP28 agreement.

In a way, Pope Francis and the COP28 collective statements from civil society networks can be described as "prophetic." Their collective positive energy, shared hope, and fervent prayers also helped in achieving a landmark COP28 agreement which commits the world to "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly, and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade ..." with the goal of keeping the global temperature limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach.

As the world moves forward with the COP28 deal, religious environmentalism can contribute more effectively at various levels given the promotion of the leading role of religious leadership in combating climate change, and endorsement of the religious discourse that calls for tangible actions toward sustainable development.

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