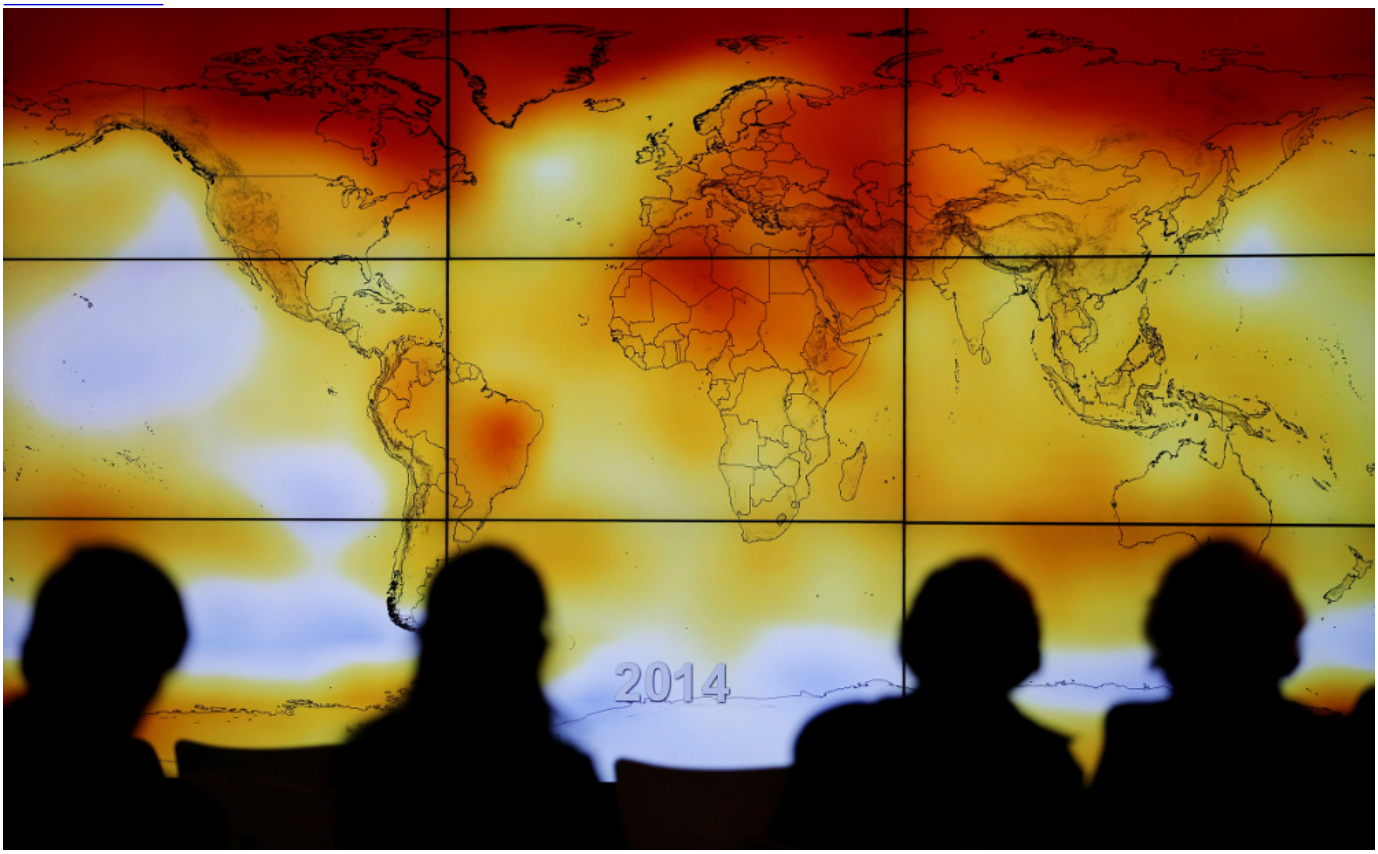
News
EarthBeat



Participants look at a screen showing a world map with climate anomalies during the World Climate Change Conference at Le Bourge, France, in this Dec. 8, 2015, file photo (CNS/Stephane Mahe, Reuters)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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Story updated Nov. 17 at 11:10 a.m. Central Time, with reaction to the close of COP23.

As United Nations climate change negotiations wound down in Bonn, Germany, Catholics, including the pope, pressed the international community for more ambitious action to combat global warming. The push included urging from 161 U.S. Catholic organizations and universities that their government recommit to seriously addressing what they called "a moral issue that threatens core Catholic commitments."

In a letter Nov. 16, the Catholic leaders pressed President Donald Trump and Congress "to reassert U.S. leadership in the global effort to address climate change," including meaningful participation in U.N. climate proceedings.

Trump announced in June his intention to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement at the earliest date (under the deal's parameters, Nov. 4, 2020). The agreement, reached in December 2015 among 195 nations, committed member states to limit national greenhouse gas emissions in an effort to hold average global temperature rise "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and strive to limit it to 1.5 degrees C (2.7 F).

The 2-degrees threshold is viewed as the point where effects of climate change such as more powerful storms and floods and prolonged droughts and heat waves — all impacts likely to harm the poor first and most forcefully — will become irreversible. Island nations, such as Fiji, the leader of this round of climate talks known by its acronym COP23, have pushed for the 1.5-degree target, given the increased vulnerability of their sea-level homes.

Related: COP23, led by island nation Fiji, aims to buoy urgency for climate action

"Catholic leaders across the nation and world have explicitly and consistently affirmed climate change as a moral issue that threatens core Catholic commitments,

including to: protect human life, promote human dignity, exercise a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, advance the common good, live in solidarity with future generations, and care for God's creation which is our common home," read the letter from Catholic leaders to Trump and Congress.

The Catholic leaders emphasized the moral obligation of the U.S. to act on climate change as historically the planet's biggest greenhouse gas emitter, and the no. 2 present-day polluter behind China.

Among the signers of the letter, organized by Catholic Climate Covenant, were the heads of Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, Pax Christi USA and Catholic Rural Life, along with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Conference of Major Superiors of Men and Des Moines, Iowa Bishop Richard Pates.

Other joining included:

- the presidents of 78 colleges and universities, including DePaul, Georgetown, Marquette, Notre Dame, Santa Clara and Seton Hall;
- the leaders of nearly 60 religious orders and congregations, more than two-thirds women religious;
- officials with six Catholic health providers, along with Sr. Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association of the United States;
- roughly a dozen Catholic advocacy groups, including NETWORK, Ignatian Solidarity Network, and Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

The signatories also requested that Congress approve $10 million in funding for the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — funding the U.S. has provided since 1992, and already passed in the Senate's 2018 budget bill — and to honor the remaining two-thirds of the country's initial $3 billion pledge to the Green Climate Fund for climate adaptation and mitigation measures in developing countries.

A statement issued by LCWR said the letter to the president and Congress "demonstrates that the U.S. Catholic community is heeding the call by Pope Francis and his predecessors to promote an integral ecology: one that more intentionally examines three overlapping relationships: with God, with one another, and with the earth."

The letter followed a similar statement last week from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops asking Congress to maintain U.S. financial support of the U.N. climate bodies.

"By supporting the [U.N. framework on climate change], the United States can direct attention and resources towards adaptation measures that help all people, especially the poor, adapt to the effects of climate change globally," read the Nov. 10 letter, signed by Bishops Oscar Cantu and Frank Dewane, chairs of the committees on International Justice and Peace and on Domestic Justice and Human Development, respectively.

Urgent call reaffirmed

The Catholic leaders' letter was released a day before COP23 was set to conclude.

The annual two-week summit (Nov. 6-17) held this year in Bonn, Germany, has focused primarily on devising a "rulebook" for implementing the Paris Agreement, including guidelines on how nations will transparently report their progress in in lowering emissions, as well as how each will increase their voluntary pledges (nationally determined pledges) over time.

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The ratcheting-up aspect is viewed as critical, with current pledges providing only a third of needed emissions reductions, and no industrialized nation on track to meet its target. A report released during COP23 found global emissions on the rise in 2017 after a three-year plateau.

"I would like to reaffirm my urgent call to renew dialogue on how we are building the future of the planet," Pope Francis said in his message to delegates of COP23. "We need an exchange that unites us all, because the environmental challenge we are experiencing, and its human roots, regards us all, and affects us all."

Francis applauded the negotiators and ministers for the "collaborative and prophetic spirit" manifest at COP21 two years ago in leading to the Paris Agreement — what he described as "a shared strategy to counteract one of the most worrying phenomena our humanity is experiencing: climate change."

At the same time, the pope warned against falling into the trap of "four pervasive attitudes" in the pursuit of concrete environmental solutions: denial of the problem, indifference, comfortable resignation and blind trust in technical solutions.

"Technical solutions are necessary but not sufficient," Francis said. "... From this perspective, it is increasingly necessary to pay attention to education and lifestyles based on an integral ecology, capable of taking on a vision of honest research and open dialogue where the various dimensions of the Paris Agreement are intertwined."

> Climate change is "one of the most worrying phenomena our humanity is experiencing."
> —Pope Francis
>
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The call for more than technical or scientific solutions resounded among faith leaders at COP23, who arrived vowing to adopt lifestyles of "compassionate simplicity," while also continuing to pressure for systemic change from governments and society.

During a webinar Nov. 14 hosted by Global Catholic Climate Movement from COP23's Bula Zone, Yeb Sano, a former U.N. climate negotiator for the Philippines and now executive director of GreenPeace Southeast Asia, echoed Francis and past popes in viewing climate change as not simply a scientific problem with scientific solutions.

"It is a reflection of a deep moral crisis that will require a spiritual awakening in all of us for us to be able to confront and avert probably the most pervasive and biggest human challenge that we are facing," said Sano, who is Catholic.

Others speaking during the webinar provided a snapshot of the proceedings to date, with debate focused on the rulebook, but also loss and damage mechanisms (meant to compensate nations already experiencing the most extreme climate events), as well as financing for adaptation and other measures.

"The politics is complicated, but the moral call is very clear," said Cliona Sharkey, a policy advisor with Trocaire, the Irish Catholic Church's development agency.

In the spirit of presiding nation Fiji, the talks have adopted what is called the "Talanoa Dialogue," an approach on the Pacific island emphasizing inclusion, respect and open to new concerns, explained Rev. James Bhagwan, a Fijian Methodist minister.

He said his people use the metaphor of "reweaving the mat" to illustrate where things stand with the environment and what the global community must do — politically, economically, ecologically and ecumenically — in order to restore the planet to a better condition. Such a process cannot delay, he emphasized.

"In the Pacific, we have islands that if this business-as-usual continues for a little bit longer, won't exist. We have people who are losing their homes, their way of life," Bhagwan said.

As COP23 closed Nov. 17 in Bonn, CIDSE, a network of international Catholic development agencies, said in a statement it saw as a positive development of the negotiations advancement regarding the global stock-take of progress on national climate action plans at COP24 next year in Poland, and the expected concurrent ramping up of commitments. Other positives came in progress on addressing climate impacts on and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, and initial steps toward integrating gender equality and the rights of indigenous peoples into climate action.

Still, CIDSE viewed COP23 as coming up short in terms of increased funding commitments, particularly for the Green Climate Fund's goal of $100 billion annually by 2020, from developed nations to developing nations already facing climate impacts.

"In agreement with what Pope Francis defines as the "ecological debt", rich countries must deliver their fair share of public climate finance to limit warming to 1.5°C. Unfortunately COP23 did not deliver on increased climate finance," Giulia Bondi, CIDSE climate justice and energy officer, said in the statement.

Mixed US messages

In its lone public event at COP23 Nov. 13, the official U.S. delegation touted the benefits of clean coal and nuclear energy as viable options to address climate change.

Three days later, 27 governments — including the United Kingdom, Canada, Mexico, and U.S. states Oregon and Washington — launched an alliance committed to phasing out coal power by 2030 in 30 industrialized countries, and globally by 2050. According to the U.N. Environment Program, as much as 90 percent of global coal reserves must remain in the ground in order to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Fr. Bruno Marie Duffé, secretary of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development representing the Holy See at COP23, said in a speech "We should not underestimate the importance of the moment we are in now," that with the Paris Agreement in hand, "now we have to form the ethical intentions to making the political happen."

"We are in the middle of the river, and we cannot go back," he said. "We have to be together, and we have to be strong, even if one state decides to go back."

A separate U.S. delegation composed of state, city and corporate leaders hosted a U.S. Climate Action Pavilion at COP23 as a show of continuing American commitment to the Paris Agreement despite the stance of the federal government. On Nov. 11, California Gov. Jerry Brown and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg presented a report highlighting non-federal U.S. actions on climate change — including 20 states and 110 cities with their own emissions reduction targets — toward meeting the U.S. pledge under the Paris Agreement: emissions reductions of 26 percent to 28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025.

In addition, the U.S. People's Delegation presented more than 1 million signatures from Americans to its "I am still in" petition.

In September 2018, the California governor will host in San Francisco a global climate action summit for subnational actors to demonstrate steps they've taken toward climate action.

In preparation, Global Catholic Climate Movement is preparing a "*Laudato Si*' Tracker" to help Catholic parishes and communities document energy usage in their buildings and other steps they've taken toward more sustainable lives as called by Francis in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

"We want to show that the Catholic Church, the Catholic community is responding to the *Laudato Si*' message with very concrete action on the ground," Tomas Insua,

GCCM executive director, said during the webinar.

Global Catholic Climate Movement, along with Troicaire, one of its 400 member organizations, has also launched a toolkit for Catholic institutions to review their investments in fossil fuels. So far, approximately 60 Catholic organizations and religious orders have made public their divestment intentions.

CIDSE published in COP23's final days a report aimed as assisting governments and stakeholders to utilize *Laudato Si*' — credited with helping bring about the Paris Agreement — in an effort to bring about the transformational change across social, economic, cultural and spiritual dimensions needed to address climate change, as well as underlying issues of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.

"We will not be able to alleviate poverty and develop in a progressive way without recognising the connection between ourselves and nature, and the important role nature plays in enabling us to develop. Likewise, we will not tackle climate change without addressing the social, economic and political factors that drive our current development pathway, putting us at odds with the stability of the planet on which we depend," the CIDSE report said.

Sano, the former Philippine climate negotiator, said a bigger role is there for faith communities worldwide to start taking action, "not just concrete ways to avert the climate crisis, to live more sustainably, to promote the principles of ecological conversion in every community, but also to hold those responsible for this crisis to account."

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]