News
EarthBeat



Wind turbines are seen in Iowa in August 2017. (Wikimedia Commons/Tony Webster)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

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broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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June 18, 2018
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Close to 600 Catholic institutions have signed the Catholic Climate Declaration, which renews Catholic support for continuing U.S. actions to address climate change despite backpedaling by the Trump administration.

The announcement June 18 of the signing coincided with the third anniversary of the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment and human ecology, "*Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*."

Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, which organized the declaration, called it "an unprecedented effort by the U.S. Catholic community to step into the void left by President [Donald] Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement" in June 2017.

"The Catholic Climate Declaration is grounded in Catholic social teaching, and it is a significant step in consolidating and galvanizing the U.S. Catholic Church's effort to care for our common home and address climate change and to join other U.S. institutions in supporting the Paris Agreement," he told reporters during a call June 18.

Among the signers are 37 dioceses, close to 200 religious communities, more than 100 parishes, 61 Catholic universities, and more than a dozen Catholic health care organizations, including the Catholic Health Association.

"As Catholic communities, organizations, and institutions in the United States, we join with other institutions from across American society to ensure that the United States remains a global leader in reducing emissions. We call for the Administration to join the global community and return to the Paris Agreement," the declaration reads.

"God's creation is in peril by our own actions," Sr. Sharlet Wagner, president-elect of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said on the press call. "If we know

creation is a gift for us to enjoy, to safeguard and to protect for future generations, climate change presents us with a moral crisis and a moral question. We must each ask ourselves what our response will be."

Bishop Richard Pates, episcopal liaison to Catholic Climate Covenant, said in a statement: "The immorality of inaction on climate change has been clear for a long time. With ever increasing temperatures fueling super hurricanes as well as extending and deepening droughts, we are seeing the tragedies of inaction up close and personal."

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Rachelle Wenger, director of public policy and community advocacy for San Francisco-based Dignity Health, told reporters that climate change isn't a political or partisan issue, but "a public health issue." She cited a report from the World Health Organization that estimated that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause 250,000 additional deaths annually through increases in malnutrition, malaria, heat stress and other preventable conditions.

The covenant said the declaration affirms the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change — reducing greenhouse gas emissions to hold average global temperature rise to no more than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and as low as 1.5 Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) compared to pre-industrial levels — and reiterates the disappointment of the U.S. bishops following Trump's announcement of the Paris exit, which can occur no sooner than November 2020.

"We found the decision of President Trump deeply troubling. And our hope would be that he would reverse that," said Pates, who is bishop of Des Moines, Iowa.

"Time is of the essence," Pates stressed, calling individuals to press for government action while taking steps to reduce emissions in their daily lives.

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The influence of Pope Francis

In *Laudato Si*', Francis affirmed the scientific consensus that climate change is occurring and is primarily the result of human activity. He called upon the global

community to together take action to avert the harshest impacts of a warming planet that impact poor and marginalized communities often first and most severely.

"*Laudato Si*' was a high-water mark for the church's decadeslong engagement in the climate issue," Misleh said. "This declaration builds on a flurry of action this past year and helps to consolidate and expand on the numerous activities already happening in the U.S. Catholic community."

The actions by Catholic institutions have come as the Trump administration has taken steps to roll back environmental regulations and boost coal and other emissions-heavy fuel sources.



Holly Sammons, a volunteer with the Adrian Dominican Sisters, prepares a garden plot for spring planting in April 2017 in Michigan. (CNS/Global Sisters

Report/Provided photo)

The covenant's Climate Energies program has lined up nearly $10 million in projects to help dioceses, parishes and Catholic organizations install energy-efficient and renewable energy projects. Jesuit Fr. Daniel Hendrickson, president of Creighton University, told reporters June 18 that the Omaha, Nebraska-based school has decreased its greenhouse gas emissions from electricity by nearly 25 percent, a savings of $2 million, and remains committed to its goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

Wagner said she limited herself to highlighting on the June 18 call a few of the "hundreds of examples of concrete climate actions women religious have taken."

Those included separate shareholder resolutions by the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the School Sisters of Notre Dame to commit two Midwest electricity firms to publish a climate risk assessment and continue dialoguing with investors on climate change. A third shareholder resolution, brought by Mercy Investment Services, committed Continental Resources to end the polluting practice of flaring in the burning of natural gas.

In terms of lowering their own carbon footprints, Wagner said the Sisters of Holy Cross have established a fund where they offset their carbon footprints through activities like air travel by donating to projects that have planted trees in Uganda and installed solar panels at schools and convents in Bangladesh and India. The Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, have committed to lowering their collective carbon footprint by 2 million pounds of carbon dioxide emissions by June 2019, while the 130-acre campus of the Adrian Dominican Sisters' motherhouse in Adrian, Michigan, now runs on 100 percent renewable energy.

Other signers to the declaration include:

- The archdioceses of Atlanta; Chicago; Indianapolis; Los Angeles; Louisville, Kentucky; Miami; Newark, New Jersey; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Washington, D.C.; as well as the entirety of Alaska: the Anchorage Archdiocese, Fairbanks Diocese and Juneau Diocese;
- The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the National Federation of Priests' Councils;

- The University of Notre Dame, Georgetown University, Santa Clara University, the University of Dayton and Villanova University, as well as the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities;
- Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Rural Life and Pax Christi USA.

In late April, Catholic Climate Covenant issued the declaration as part of the Catholics Are Still In campaign. That effort aligns Catholics with a similar, broader push by the We Are Still In coalition of 2,800 governors, mayors, business and university leaders, and other organizations; the coalition aims to fortify U.S. commitment to the Paris Agreement no matter what steps the federal government takes.

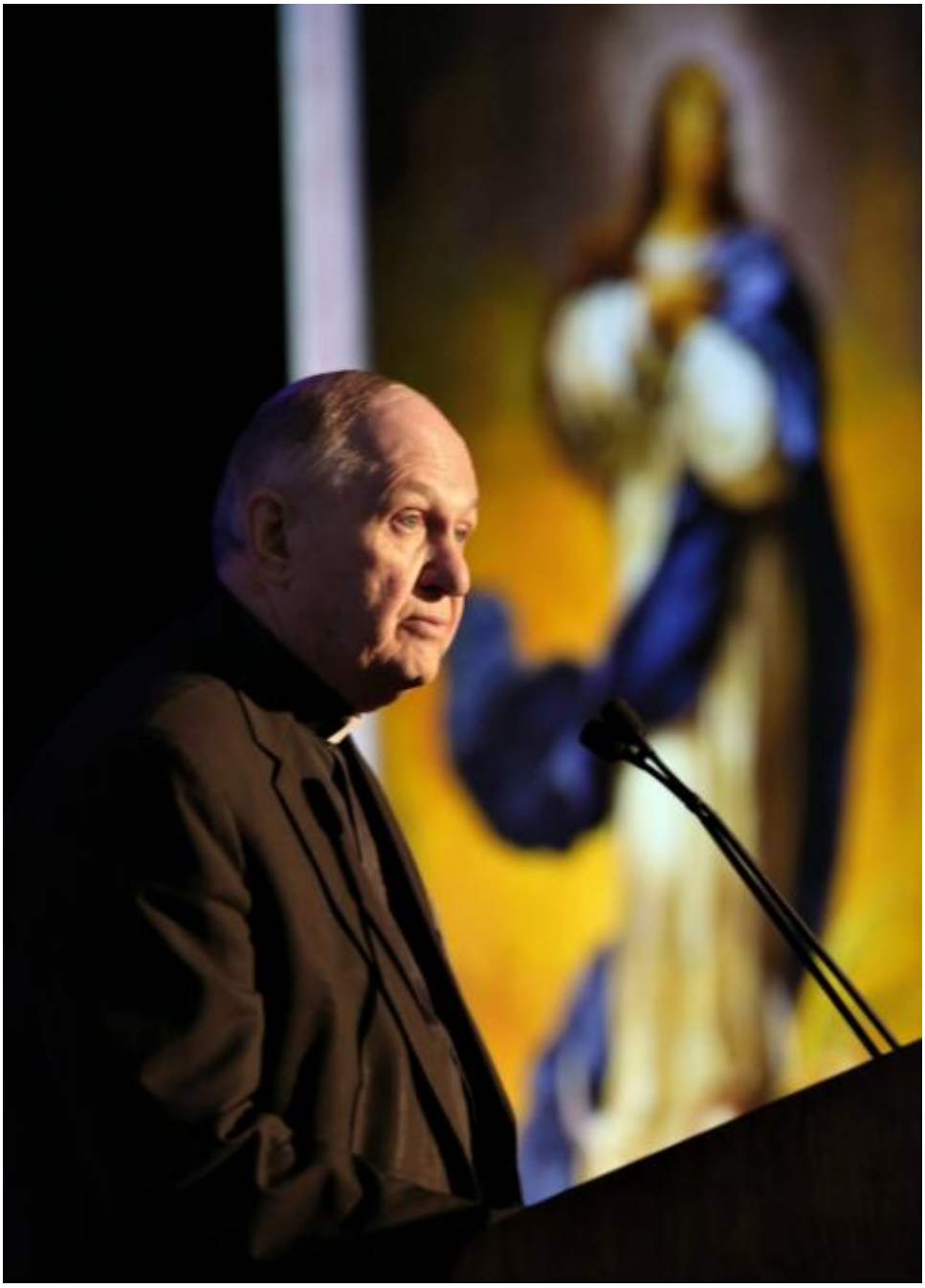
The Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco in September will showcase climate actions underway within those segments of society. It will also push for new, more ambitious commitments ahead of the next United Nations climate conference, COP24, to be held in early December in Poland.

Religious communities, including Catholics, are planning to take part in the summit. Catholic Climate Covenant said it plans to share its declaration at the event and will continue to gather signatures throughout the summer.

Bringing the US bishops on board

At the spring assembly of the U.S. bishops, Pates addressed his fellow bishops early in the proceedings to urge them to sign their individual dioceses to the declaration "in the exercise of our moral leadership" and for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as a whole to do the same.

On that end, he announced that Bishop Frank Dewane, chairman of the bishops' Committee for Domestic Justice and Human Development, said he would begin the process of having the bishops' conference sign the Catholic Climate Declaration. He said they hoped to bring it back to the bishops at their November meeting.



Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, speaks June 13 during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"Our episcopal leadership can exercise a significant positive impact across the board," Pates said at the Florida gathering last week.

In addition to providing each bishop in attendance with a declaration sign-up sheet, Pates also made sure to put in their hands Francis' speech from days earlier to a

meeting of top oil executives and CEOs at the Vatican. Offering a summary of the talk, Pates told the bishops that Francis classified protecting the environment and helping the poor as "two great needs of the world."

He also quoted Francis: "Progress has indeed been made, but is it enough? Will we turn the corner in time? No one can answer that with certainty but with the passing of each month, the challenge of energy transition becomes more pressing."

Pates added that Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have all spoken of the importance of addressing a warming planet, "illustrating the strong continuity on this question of climate change."

John Paul II and Benedict called for an ecological conversation, with Benedict writing about the beauty of creation, Pates told NCR after his speech. Francis has continued that call while strongly stating it's time to act.

"He's calling for action. And I think we have to hear him," Pates said. "He's not just wanting us to say, 'Well it's a good idea' or that sort of thing. He's calling for action."

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

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