News
EarthBeat



San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy counts down before he leads a sing-along of "God Bless America" during the inaugural "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference series June 27, 2019, at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)



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During an advocacy-focused breakout session at last month's "*Laudato Si*' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference, a room of 30 Catholics were asked to list organizations and people within the church they perceived as engaged on the issue of climate change.

Almost every corner of the church — colleges, hospitals, women religious, Pope Francis, aid organizations, even bishops' conferences of other countries — was represented in the 20 or so groups named.

But not the U.S. bishops.

Instead, they were relegated to a second list: those with the potential to become more engaged.

In the classroom at Creighton University was San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy, who sat at a student desk and listened. For most of the three days, McElroy was a regular participant in the conference co-sponsored by Catholic Climate Covenant and Creighton. He joined small-group discussions, sat in the audience during presentations and shared meals at a campus cafeteria.

The San Diego bishop has become one of the leading voices among U.S. bishops on Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home." McElroy joined his fellow bishops of California in June in issuing their own pastoral statement on the environment. Four years earlier, shortly after the encyclical's release, he encouraged pastors in his diocese to explore installing solar panels at their churches. So far, about half of the 97 parishes have done so, with more to come.

Several times during the conference, McElroy addressed the question of bishop engagement. He characterized it as an issue of focus — that few bishops would

dispute the pope's encyclical and many have no issue encouraging Catholics wanting to take on creation care projects. The tougher ask, he said, is getting them to make it a greater priority amid an ever-expanding slate of issues.

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"The other thing is that we can't ignore for a moment the general credibility loss the bishops have in speaking to issues in society as a whole," he told NCR in a sit-down interview midway through the conference.

McElroy, 65, said he would like to see "a structurally deeper level of commitment" to the encyclical within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, beyond the work already done by some of its offices and programs on environmental policy and climate adaptation and mitigation. (The USCCB helped form the Catholic Climate Covenant in 2006, and remain among its 18 national partners.)

"If we don't get this issue right, in the end none of the other issues are going to matter, because human dignity will have been destroyed as we know it if our planet is destroyed," he said.

In his opening keynote address June 27, McElroy laid out an argument for climate change to become "a central priority" for the U.S. Catholic Church.

Titled "Paradise Lost: The Urgent Summons of *Laudato Si*' to the American People at This Moment in Our History," the bishop used John Milton's poem "Paradise Lost" as a frame to examine the estrangements — from God, nature, one another and truth itself — that have broken the relationship between people today and "the earth that is our common home."

Related: Bishop McElroy on Laudato Si': An 'urgent summons' to the American people

"*Laudato Si*' both unmasks this estrangement and points to the pathway forward for us to move from alienation toward healing and the renewal of the earth. The encyclical is a call to arms for those who would rescue our bruised planet from the forces that deplete and destroy it," McElroy said. "But *Laudato Si*' is so much more than this. For in its delineation of an integral human ecology, it emphasizes that the

illnesses that plague our world on so many levels are interrelated, and that progress in any one dimension requires attending to the wholeness of the human person and the human family just as it attends to the wholeness of our planet earth."

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***NCR*: What have you learned in these couple days so far, especially in the breakout sessions?**

McElroy: Tremendous energy. Tremendous creativity. Tremendously diverse approaches to the questions of the environment in the life of the church. A great deal of dedication to the principles of *Laudato Si*', particularly that gift that is creation, that there's great urgency to the issues of the environment.

At the same time, I'd say the difficult challenges that are emerging here, too, is how do we move forward in terms of the life of the church? How does the church as a group in society more effectively bring people together, educate people in terms of the principles of *Laudato Si*', foster a sense of collaboration, solidarity, and action on these questions? And particularly reach out to young people. I'd say that those are the challenges that I've encountered from people here.

From presentations and conversations, has anything particularly struck you, perhaps actions that Catholics are taking on environmental issues? Or something else that has surprised you?

I think one thing that isn't in the mix here that I think is important for us to reflect upon in some sophisticated way is the economics of this. That is, none of the presentations are focused on what does it mean economically for us to grapple with and confront climate change, and to eradicate it.



Smoke rises from two smokestacks at the American Electric Power Co.'s Mountaineer plant in New Haven, West Virginia, in a 2009 file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Ayesha Rascoe)

Because that's an argument I hear from people. One is, there are those who deny the science, but most people understand the science eventually. But on the economic question, that's the second one, we have to say, what are the costs that people are going to have to face in order to confront this crisis, for the benefit of future generations?

One of the common themes that's come out in all of these things, which in a way surprises me, but I think it is the core question, is intergenerational solidarity. It's not so much, what is the crisis going to mean for me in my life? What is it going to mean for the next generation and the generation after? And what kind of a moral choice do we make as individuals in a society if we don't confront it?

What do you see as the significance of this Catholic climate gathering itself? What potential do you see it having?

Well, I think, on one level, what will emerge is people will go back to their dioceses and their states with many more ideas on how to realistically approach making the principles of *Laudato Si*' alive and enfleshed in the life of the church in their local parishes and dioceses. So I think the exchange of ideas on strategies and tactics is very important.

Secondly, the more national questions are why haven't we progressed further on this in terms of structures of national reach in the church? And how can we better do that? So I'd say those are the two elements of exchange.

You have made regular references to *Laudato Si*' at bishops' meetings, such as advocating its inclusion into the "Faithful Citizenship" document. Here at Creighton, you've spoken about the issue of focus. How does climate change get greater focus among U.S. bishops, to move it up their priority list?



A worker collects trash in a containment along Baltimore's Inner Harbor June 11. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Well, I would say as to why it should have a central priority and focus is that if we don't get this issue right, in the end none of the other issues are going to matter, because human dignity will have been destroyed as we know it if our planet is destroyed. And thus, there is a comprehensiveness to the emergency posed by climate change and economic degradation, that it's so mammoth in its consequences that it has a rightful claim to a top priority in the social issues facing

the world today. So as a claim of focus, I think it has that.

Secondly, the question then is, I really think it should have a structurally deeper level of commitment within the bishops' conference, this issue of *Laudato Si*'. It doesn't get an enormous degree of attention within the structure. There's no committee for it, specifically. There's a committee it falls under, which is the [committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on International Justice and Peace] and then the joint committee between them.

But for example, when religious liberty was perceived to be at stake, a new committee was formed. There was nothing done on this document to make it a priority, and I think there needs to be a structural realignment of how the questions of creation are faced within the conference if we're going to have an effect.

Do the California bishops, in terms of how they arrived at their pastoral statement, offer an example of something that could be modeled at the national level?

I think it absolutely could. And I'd love to see other state conferences do it. Because for each state conference, there will be a different constellation of environmental issues specific to that state, both good and joyous and treasures and then endangered elements of local life. But I think that would be a great thing for states to do.

California has a particular ability to navigate in these questions because the state economy is so large. That in many ways on environmental questions, the state of California has simply taken an independent course, independent of the federal government and established standards that are more binding for a whole range of areas supporting the environment.

They can do that, because it's a big state with a big economy. Most states, you can't do that. But I do think a lot of local action to advance the protection of the environment could be undertaken at the state conferences and the state levels.



Bishop Robert McElroy is seen in October 2018 at Our Mother of Confidence Parish Hall in San Diego. The parish is among those in the diocese that have installed solar panels. (CNS/David Maung)

What potential do you see the California bishops' pastoral statement having?

I would hope it would be an inspiring foundation for work within California. In particular, the ability to have creation care teams in local parishes. That to me is a wonderful thing. We've done some work in that area. We had a creation care team fair in the [San Diego] diocese two years ago. And it was wonderful to see, again, lots of young people, but some not-so-young people, and what they had done in bringing projects that they've been involved with and steps they had taken in their parish levels to safeguard the environment to advance the principles of *Laudato Si*' and bringing it to the homes of the parish.

So I'm hopeful that this California letter can be an inspiring template that people use in the parishes to reflect on, and say this points us in the right direction of what we

should be doing as a parish on creation care.

One of the goals of the pastoral statement was as an evangelization tool as well, particularly for young adults. Is this an issue or focus that the church can look to as a way to restore credibility?

I do think it's a wide issue area where there's a resonance between what the church is saying is important, and what young adults think is critical to the future of the world they're going to be living in. So yes, I do think that is an area of outreach to young adults, and one in which there will be a lot of shared perceptions on the reality that we confront and the values that overlay it and the beauty of creation itself.

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