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Greta Thunberg speaks to young people and their supporters at a student climate strike rally outside the White House Sept. 13 in Washington, D.C. (Rick Reinhard)



by Brian Roewe

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Meet Ava Rabiner.

She's 17, and a senior at St. Mary Academy-Bay View in East Providence, Rhode Island. She supports the Green New Deal. And on Friday, she'll be joining more than three dozen classmates in walking out of their school, run by the Sisters of Mercy, and heading to Burnside Park in downtown Providence as part of the latest global youth climate strike.

"I think that all other issues fall secondary to climate change. That if we don't have a planet, then we won't have a democracy to protect," she told NCR. "So it's vitally important that we get people talking about climate change and we get people acting on their words."

Meet Sr. Mary Pendergast.

She's 73, and a Sister of Mercy living in Rhode Island. She also supports the Green New Deal, and has been active for decades on ecological issues. She'll be at Burnside Park on Friday, too.

"These kids deserve a future," she said. "And it's my responsibility to protect. To act on behalf of creation, to protect the poor and future generations."

The two, separated by nearly six decades in age, will be joining forces, along with people in roughly 150 countries and an estimated 4,800 protests, in the Sept. 20-27 climate strikes, part of the Fridays for Future movement begun last year by Swedish teen Greta Thunberg. This mass student strike, the third global iteration, is the first that has invited people of all ages to join. Not that age kept Pendergast from standing with young people at the past protests.

"I'm 73 years old, so I'm not leading anything," the Mercy sister said. "But I can be an ally."

Said Rabiner of older generations joining the young, "It's an alliance, I guess, that's really valuable to have. To have these people on our side."



Mercy Sr. Mary Pendergast, center, joins the Sunrise Movement at a demonstration Sept. 9 in Rhode Island urging U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse and Gov. Gina Raimondo to support the Green New Deal. (Provided photo)

The strikes, including more than 230 organized by Catholics, are protesting inaction by global leaders in addressing climate change — what many of the strikers see as a crisis and requiring immediate steps to avert catastrophe, and put the planet on pace to limit warming above the most dangerous levels. The Sept. 20 strike is timed to take place three days before the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York City.

This year's summer tied with 2016 as the hottest on record for the Northern Hemisphere, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported this week. July stood alone as the planet's hottest month ever recorded.

In her repeated messages to world leaders, the latest coming this week in congressional hearings, the 16-year-old Thunberg has made it a central point to urge them to listen to, and act on, the science — specifically, the U.N. special climate report on the consequences of 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming. To avert that scenario, climate scientists say the world must cut its greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 on the way to net-zero emissions by midcentury.

At a U.S. Senate climate task force Sept. 17, she told lawmakers to "save your praise, we don't want it" and instead urged them to do more.

"I know you are trying but just not hard enough. Sorry."

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>
> —Bill McKibben
>
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Time for elders to step up

After arriving in the U.S. in late August by a zero-emissions boat, Thunberg joined a strike Sept. 13 outside the White House and will be at the New York City strike Friday.

Bill McKibben, a veteran of the climate movement who's taken part in nearly every mass mobilization on the issue, on a Sept. 12 press call predicted that Friday's strike "is going to be the biggest day of climate action that planet Earth has yet seen."

The author and founder of the grassroots climate group 350.org called it "incredibly exciting" to see how in the past year young people, long part of the climate movement, have asserted greater leadership. He said the youth climate strikes have made it clear that young people are tired of waiting for substantial action on climate change, and he urged their elders to back them up.

"It's not fair to ask 17-year-olds to solve the biggest problem the world has ever faced by themselves. Their call has been eloquent and clear; it is time for everybody else to join in," McKibben said.

When asked if she was participating in the strike Friday, Pendergast replied with an "of course" and a chuckle.

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Beyond joining past climate strikes, she has met with the Sunrise Movement, the youth climate organization that has advocated for the Green New Deal, and attended local planning meetings. She said she's been impressed by their focus, whether on climate, jobs or health care, on making the world better for everyone, not just a few — and also for Mother Nature.

"We owe them a debt of gratitude," she said of young people, "because they're taking over and it's a groundswell from the bottom up, which is going to demand the people at the top to listen.

"They're loud and they're persistent," Pendergast added. "They're going to make this happen. People of my generation are not going to make it happen. They're still doing business as usual, in spite of all of the evidence that we are in a catastrophe."

Other Mercy sisters plan to join strikes across the U.S. and a number of their sponsored schools have organized prayer services and other events. In the case of

St. Mary Academy-Bay View, they're chartering a bus.



Students from St. Mary Academy-Bay View join the student climate strike on March 15 outside the statehouse in Providence, Rhode Island. (Sr. Mary Pendergast)

Colleen Gribbin, a Mercy associate and principal of the all-girls school, said the hope is students graduate socially conscious, "and so we try to provide every avenue for them to be that person."

For Rabiner, the strike will be her third public protest. She joined the climate strike in March, and also demonstrated against the Trump administration's travel ban. It was that experience, listening with her mother to activists speak outside the Rhode Island Statehouse, that inspired her to do more herself.

Rabiner said there's "a fire bubbling inside the youth of America" when it comes to climate change, "because it directly impacts our lives and the lives of our potential

children and their children after that."

Other youth strikers who spoke on the media call stressed the same message, and encouraged adults to support them by thinking in a similar way.

"The reason why the youth are fighting for the environment, for the world, is for our future and our children's future. So we're hoping that you can fight for your children's future, too," said Mitzi Tan, a 21-year-old recent college graduate in Quezon City, Philippines.



Hundreds of students and young people and their supporters rally on the Ellipse behind the White House Sept. 13 in a Friday student climate strike protest. (Rick Reinhard)

Young people due 'real answers'

The idea of intergenerational solidarity has been a persistent emphasis of Pope Francis throughout his papacy. In October, he released a book that he said spoke to what he feels "the Lord wants me to say: that there should be an alliance between

the young and old people" — one he believes that can change the world.

The Global Catholic Climate Movement has invited Catholic churches to ring their bells for five minutes on Sept. 20 and Sept. 27 in solidarity with the climate strikes.

In his message Sept. 1 for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, the 82-year-old pontiff praised young people around the world in calling for "courageous decisions" to address the present "climate emergency."

"The young remind us that the earth is not a possession to be squandered, but an inheritance to be handed down," Francis said. "They remind us that hope for tomorrow is not a noble sentiment, but a task calling for concrete actions here and now. We owe them real answers, not empty words, actions not illusions."

For Olivia Sally, a senior at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California, it was moments in her grandmother's garden and family road trips to national parks that sparked her love of nature. Friday will be the first climate strike for the 17-year-old.



Olivia Sally, center, strikes a pose with her sister Madison and mother Dawn at Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. (Provided photo)

She and others on the Solidarity in Action social justice team have been coordinating their school's participation in the strike in neighboring San Francisco. They signed up students at lunch, petitioned the Oakland Unified School District to permit excused absences, and even drafted explanation letters for potential absences. Figuring out the BART transportation system alone has been a struggle in itself, Sally said in an email.

Raised in a Christian family, she said that climate change poses a threat to creation and human dignity, and that by participating in the strike she can unite her religious beliefs with social justice. And she hopes her mother will join her, too.

"The issue should empower all ages to see the decline [caused by climate change] and take action," Sally said.

In Portland, Oregon, parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church have made participating in the strike part of their observance of the ecumenical Season of Creation, which runs Sept. 1-Oct. 4.

After a prayer service, they plan to bus from their church to City Hall, where the city's protest is taking place. They'll then join the strike behind their *Laudato Si*' banner, with pamphlets about the pope's encyclical on the environment ready to pass out.



Fr. Michael Biewend, pastor at St. Mary Magdalene Church in Portland, Oregon, joins two young girls on top of a pile of plastic foam collected as part of an Earth Day recycling collection. (The Madeline Parish)

The parish advertised the strike in its Mass bulletin, and sent an email to the parents of schoolchildren saying the strike is "an important opportunity for your child to engage in education outside of the classroom walls and bear witness to the Church's Social Teachings." At least a handful of elementary students have said they plan to attend.

Bill Hunter will also be there. Turning 75 later this month, he has been a part of the parish's Laudato Si' Circle prayer group. He and others view the strike as a way to bring together their study of the pope's encyclical and Catholic social teaching with their concerns about climate change, particularly what it means for their grandchildren.

Like others, Hunter sees a "fearless conviction and energetic creativity" that young people have brought to the climate issue. What older people bring, he said, is experience; in his case, he was among the lawyers who finalized the 1998 master settlement agreement with the country's five largest cigarette manufacturers. Those lessons, Hunter said, can be adapted in the shift away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy.

To Rabiner, the St. Mary Academy student, those types of life experiences can benefit younger activists, especially to help them consider how their words and actions might be seen and portrayed in media or by opponents. Other young people said that adults can help substantiate their claims to some people, and urged their elders to take actions that they yet cannot, such as voting.

"We've been around a long time," Pendergast said. "Some of us have some wisdom to offer."

"What they ask of me, I will gladly do."

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