News

EarthBeat



Participants are seen in a May 29, 2020, Zoom dialogue about "Laudato Si After Five Years: Hearing the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor." They are Kim Daniels of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University; Christiana Zenner of Fordham University; Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Dan Misleh of Catholic Climate Covenant ; and Kim Wasserman of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. (CNS/screen grab via Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Georgetown University)



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Pope Francis' message in his 2015 encyclical on the relationship of people to the environment is simple, agreed a panel of speakers during an online dialogue.

It's a message that focuses on how each person is connected to each other and to the natural environment, while recognizing there is a call to be good stewards of God's creation by respecting each other and the communities in which people live.

The pope's call in the encyclical, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," was the starting point for the hourlong discussion sponsored by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life and Georgetown University May 29.

The encyclical builds upon the teaching of the pope's predecessors, including St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, said Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. The document focuses on an "integral ecology" that incorporates the "ecology of the human person, the ecology of nature and the ecology of peace," he said.

"The word ecology is not something academic, far away removed from us," he said. "It is the environment in which we live. Let us recognize we all create the environment in which we live, and recognize how we all play a role in building and maintaining a clean environment," Turkson said.

The document also draws from the experiences and teaching of bishops around the world who have witnessed the struggles of people who have lost land, seen access to water reduced, live with heavily polluted air and are threatened by industries eyeing critical natural resources, the cardinal said.

Throughout the document, the pope invites people to dialogue with each other and from that dialogue can come the desire to care for the earth, he explained.

Further, he continued, a deep sense of care for all of creation — people and nature alike — can emerge and lead to deep conversion to work for social, economic and

environmental justice and to institute changes in lifestyle from one of waste and overconsumption to one of stewardship.

Other panelists unpacked the encyclical by exploring the connection of people to each other while citing specific actions in response to the threats of climate change on poor and vulnerable people around the world.

"The ecology is not just about the environment," said Christiana Zenner, associate professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University. "It's that we humans are not separate from the environments that we inhabit, that climate change is not just about science and industrialized nations. Ecology permeates everything."

Zenner urged viewers of the livestreamed broadcast to step back to reflect on "who do we understand ourselves to be and who are we beholden to."

Participant Kim Wasserman, executive director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in Chicago, explained how the community organization worked for 12 years to close a pair of outdated coal-fired power plants that dumped pollution across a wide expanse of the southwestern part of the city.

Utilizing their own air, soil and water samples, the organization managed to convince utility officials and Chicago city officials the plants were harming the community of 95,000 residents, she said.

The properties have since been bought by a company seeking to build a department store warehouse, and Wasserman said residents are concerned that pollution from tractor-trailer rigs will raise pollution levels in the neighborhood again.

So people are organizing to block the project, especially since a demolition crew tore down a smokestack on the property April 11 — Holy Saturday and in the middle of government-imposed stay-at-home orders — without informing the strongly Catholic community.

Such disrespect for the lives of the working-class people who live in Little Village is a prime example of the kind of challenges Francis addresses in his encyclical, she explained.

"We believe people should be part of the conversation, that there's dignity in our voice being heard," Wasserman said.

Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, called for more actively bringing people together to address the world's environmental crisis, even during the time of the pandemic, "and creating a sense of urgency."

He stressed that as the world is depending on science to find a solution to the coronavirus pandemic, it also must depend on science to chart climate change.

Misleh pointed to the existence of more than 500 "creation care teams" at parishes across the country as one sign the encyclical is taking root in the lives of everyday Catholics. Such efforts can demonstrate to young people the Catholic Church cares about promoting environmental justice, Misleh said.

"If we want young people to come back to the church, we need to have a strong creation care program ministry. They care about that," he said.

Turkson said such work illustrates the message of Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical "Populorum Progressio" ("The Progress of Peoples"), which emerged in the years following the Second Vatican Council.

That document stressed the importance of people thriving in life, he said.

Explaining there is a need to maintain an environment that protects the wealth of nature, Turkson said the result is an understanding that humanity "must respect water, the forests, the land so that these can thrive."

Such respect extends to the "cry" for justice being sought in the May 25 death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis. Police had stopped Floyd, an African American, on suspicion of forgery.

Once Floyd, 46, was handcuffed, a white officer pinned him down on the street, putting his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes. A now widely circulated video shows Floyd repeatedly saying, "I can't breathe." He appears to lose consciousness or die and was later declared dead at the hospital.

"The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are reaching to us," Turkson, "because what they need to thrive in a prosperous environment is denied to them."

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