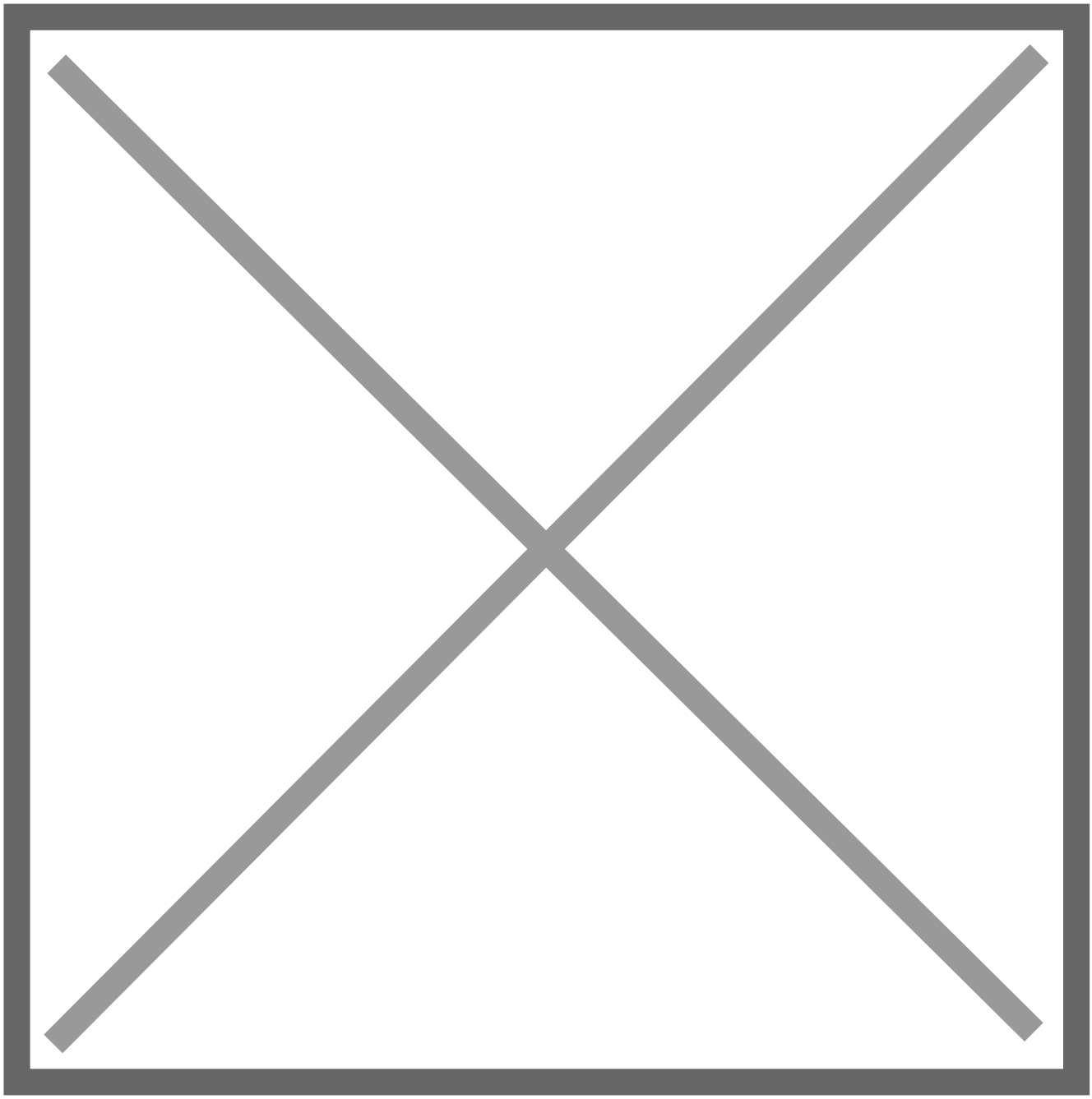


Smoke rises from Duke Energy's Marshall Steam Station in Sherrills Ford, N.C., Nov. 29, 2018. Governments have an unprecedented "moral duty" to take urgent action to combat climate change, Catholic development agencies said before the U.N. Climate Change Summit in 2019. (CNS photo/Reuters/Chris Keane)



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Among the stark differences between presidential candidates Donald Trump, the Republican incumbent, and Joe Biden, the Democratic challenger, among the most pronounced is their stances on the environment and energy development.

Trump's term in office has been marked by the rollback of dozens of regulations and rules governing environmental safeguards, denial of climate change, encouragement of widespread fossil fuel development to promote American energy independence, and withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate accord that commits adherents to reducing carbon emissions.

Biden's far-reaching platform posted on his campaign website seeks to eradicate carbon pollution from power plants by 2035, cement alternative energy as part of the country's future, leading to new jobs and an economic recovery from the pandemic, and a return to the Paris agreement to address climate change.

That the candidates widely differ on environmental protection and energy development is no surprise. The question comes down to which plan will come closer to bringing the country closer to church teaching, Catholic election watchers said.

Deciphering the actions and pledges of the candidates on environmental protection is difficult. But the watchers pointed to Catholic social teaching, papal documents and the U.S. bishops' quadrennial document on voting, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility," as places to start.

While not specifically written for American voters, Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on integral human development, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," can be a helpful tool to reflect on the importance of protecting creation, upholding human dignity and contributing to the common good, they said.

The document's teaching message focuses on understanding that all life is connected and decisions about how to utilize the earth's resources must promote human flourishing, said Daniel DiLeo, assistant professor and director of the Justice and Peace Studies program at Jesuit-run Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

The encyclical, DiLeo explained, provides guidelines to compare the environmental and economic platforms of Trump and Biden.

"To me, this is really about trying to discern the different platforms in light of the church's teaching about ecology and life and the role of the state. That's the standard," DiLeo said.

Trump came into office in 2017 promising to build American energy independence and roll back two regulations for every one created. Nowhere is that more apparent than in his administration's efforts to hear industry desires to ease regulatory burdens that corporate officials claim cost billions of dollars and produce minimal health and environmental benefits.

Several programs have tracked Trump administration rollbacks of regulations affecting the environment, including the Institute for Policy Integrity at New York University Law School, the Environmental and Energy Law Program at Harvard Law School, and a partnership between the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School and Columbia University's Earth Institute.

Each details dozens of deregulatory actions emanating largely from the Environmental Protection Agency. Many rollbacks have been challenged in the courts as environmental advocates have decried the measures, saying business profits have taken precedent over human health and wildlife and resource protection.

The White House website promotes Trump's efforts to protect the environment with no mention of the rollbacks. It focuses on actions that have kept air and water "the cleanest ... in the world."

Brent Fewell, general counsel at ConservAmerica, told Catholic News Service that rollbacks are not necessarily bad, especially if they involve outdated regulations that go beyond what Congress intended when adopting anti-pollution laws beginning in the 1970s.

An evangelical and a former EPA official in the administration of George W. Bush, Fewell said he believes Trump is concerned about the environment, but that his approach prefers to let the market determine how extensive protections must be. Free markets build economic strength, Fewell said.

"The stronger the economy is, the more environmental protection you can afford," he said.

Companies are realizing that protecting the environment can be profitable, Fewell added, saying that Trump's policies are aimed at allowing businesses to pursue actions they perceive as necessary — and economically worthwhile — without being required to do so by overreaching regulations.

Fewell also said Trump's philosophy is driven by the idea that the best environmental regulation comes at the local level and not from the federal government. "Top down control no longer works in many, many cases," he said.

Biden's plans, which his platform describes as a "clean energy revolution," would address "climate challenges" by building up environmentally friendly alternatives to grow well-paying jobs in new industries to revitalize the economy.

One notable aspect is Biden's call for environmental justice for low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Biden calls for investments of $1.7 trillion over the next decade, paid for by rolling back the tax cuts sought by Trump and passed by Congress in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017.

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While Biden hasn't embraced the wide-ranging Green New Deal put forth by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York, and Sen. Edward Markey, D-Massachusetts, some of his proposed initiatives are taken from their framework legislation.

A prime distinction between the candidates' stances on the environment relates to the Paris climate accord. The Trump administration is in the process of withdrawing the U.S. from it. Biden has said he would begin on his first day in office to return the country to the comprehensive agreement.

A U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops committee has long supported U.S. participation in the accord. Bishop Oscar Cantu, who now heads the Diocese of San Jose, California, and at the time was chairman of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, urged Trump not to back out of the agreement in 2017.

Margaret Pfeil, associate teaching professor of moral theology and Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame, expressed concern about the Trump environmental record and urged Catholics to cautiously view the president's explanations of his steps.

Pfeil told CNS she has found that the president's record on the environment shows little regard for the natural world, belying his pro-life advocacy.

"Human survival is wrapped in the survival of the rest of creation," Pfeil said. "This shouldn't be a partisan issue at all. If we really say we are pro-life, it ought to mean care for all of creation as well. I don't see how we get around that.

"He has managed to appeal to people of faith on a very narrow conception of what pro-life means," Pfeil added. "If you dig a little deeper, it doesn't make a lot of sense in the body of Catholic social tradition."

In the introduction to "Faithful Citizenship," the bishops identify abortion and infanticide as of "preeminent priority." However, the document also states no issue is optional for the Catholic voter to form his or her conscience on. Other issues related to human dignity, such as immigration policy, racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty require voters' "prudential judgment," it says.

Bill Patenaude, who writes the Catholic Ecology blog and has worked for more than three decades as an engineer in Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management, urged Catholics to seriously consider the environmental stances of the major party candidates.

"Our whole faith is rooted in our relationship with creation," he told CNS. "As I always say, 'Catholics are environmentalists whether they like it or not.' The very foundation of Scripture is creation."

He described Adam and Eve as the first "consumers," who saw something they wanted and "they didn't worry about the consequences."

Patenaude said the church's voice is nuanced on issues such as the environment and that Catholic social teaching invites the faithful to "make decisions for the common good."

"On certain issues there are prudential ways of making decisions that benefit both parties that get us to where we need to be. We must understand that creation is something we have to take care of. It's not optional," Patenaude said.

In the end it "becomes a question how do we do it," he added. "That's hard."