News
EarthBeat



Wind turbines operate at sunrise in the Permian Basin oil and natural gas production area in Big Spring, Texas, Feb. 12, 2019. (CNS photo/Nick Oxford, Reuters)



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May 21, 2021
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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the May 21 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

The first week of Laudato Si' Week, which actually spans 10 days, has come to a close, with some of the strongest Vatican statements to date about the need for humans to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy if we are to avert the worst impacts of a climate crisis.

Speaking at a webinar about divestment from fossil fuels, an official of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development called such action a moral and theological imperative also dictated by science. And Pope Francis tweeted out a call for a rapid energy transition, repeating a message he's regularly delivered since the release of his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" nearly six years ago.

There is a growing Catholic movement lobbying for universities, congregations and other church entities to eliminate fossil fuel investments from their portfolios. At the same time, some Catholic activists argue that the best course is to retain small interests so as to be able to influence companies from within, and there's agreement across approaches on directing finances toward companies working on climate solutions.

NCR environment correspondent Brian Roewe, who's covered the week's events, takes an in-depth look at how Catholic action on divestment has evolved in recent years, particularly in response to increasingly strong directives coming from the Vatican, and at the debate over divestment vs. stockholder engagement. He also reports that the U.S. bishops are reviewing their own investment guidelines for

Catholics, which have not been updated since 2003.

The week also saw the Global Catholic Climate Movement launch an online petition urging delegates to two upcoming U.N. conferences — one on biodiversity and one on climate — to take action to protect the health of humans and ecosystems, as well as the territories of Indigenous peoples. And several religious orders have joined with the climate movement to form a Creation Care Prayer Network.

And Bishops John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, and Robert McElroy of San Diego have voiced support for a carbon tax to encourage decreased fossil fuel use.

In an interesting coincidence of timing, the International Energy Agency this week also released a groundbreaking report setting out the actions that the world's countries must take to meet the Paris Agreement goal of keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The report says starkly that the current commitments made voluntarily by governments are insufficient, and it calls for an immediate ban on new oil, gas and coal development.

There's a good, brief summary at The Conversation of how the IEA, an organization founded in the 1970s to support stable fossil fuel supplies, has done an about-face with this report. The agency describes the steps necessary for the world to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, but warns that it won't be easy. Besides shifting investments from fossil fuels to renewables, it will require support for the countries and communities that suffer most from the fallout, and it will mean that all of us will have to change our behavior.

Besides pushback from the fossil fuel industry, there are bound to be other criticisms of the report — it assumes continued economic growth; cites an increased need for certain minerals, which raises the possibility of conflicts with local communities in mining areas; and assumes the continued use of nuclear power and hydroelectricity, both of which are controversial.

The scenario it sets out through 2030 depends on existing technologies, but reaching the 2050 target will depend on technologies that are not yet fully developed. And while the agency calls for ensuring that the transition is equitable for low-income countries, that will depend on the willingness of the global community to pull together. The pandemic has shown us the pitfalls there.

Nevertheless, the IEA report is bound to shift the conversation about fossil fuels, just as Francis and other Catholics are raising their voices about the need for an

ecological conversion. The next few years will show whether the moral, theological and scientific imperatives are finally tipping us toward a more just and sustainable future.

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Our readers write back:

EarthBeat reader Jim Martin of Huntington Beach, California, commented on Roewe's story about the bishops' support for a carbon tax, mentioning the legislation, H.R. 2307, the Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act, being introduced in Congress:

"The real reason we have a problem with climate change is that we do not pay the cost of climate change when we buy fossil fuel. We pay for the cost to put gasoline in our cars, but we do not pay the cost of climate change caused by the carbon coming out the exhaust; that cost is paid by everyone in the world and will be for a long time," he wrote. "When the price of carbon increases [with a tax], some products will rise in cost more than others, and we will naturally choose those that do not increase as much. If we can pass H.R. 2307, the emission reductions from conservation may be much more than predicted."

Here's what else is new on EarthBeat this week:

- Catholic News Service reports that a Jesuit priest jailed in India because of his defense of poor and landless farmers was transferred to a hospital because of his deteriorating health.
- Cindy Wooden of Catholic News Service reports that John Kerry, the U.S. special envoy for climate, met privately with Pope Francis May 15, the day after he gave a keynote address at a closed-door meeting of the Pontifical Academies for Sciences and Social Sciences.
- A New York artist has elevated endangered species to icon status in a series of Byzantine-inspired paintings, drawing attention to their plight at a time when as many as 1 million species are in danger of extinction. I spoke with the artist, Angela Manno, about her icon series.
- In other animal news, a species of screech owl new to science, discovered in the Brazilian Amazon, was named *Megascops stangiae,* to honor the martyred Sr. Dorothy Stang. Her congregation, and the researchers who identified the

species, say the name fits, reports Lise Alves for Global Sisters Report.
- Students at a school in an economically disadvantaged area of Jersey City, New Jersey, tackled a real-life problem that grown-ups hadn't solved — stormwater runoff and flooding that blocked access to their school — and worked out a solution in a real-life application of their math and science lessons. Phil Roberts reports for Next City, a member of the Covering Climate Now consortium.

And here's some of what's new in other climate news:

- Emily Langer at The Washington Post takes a look at the remarkable career of Christopher Stone, a leading figure in environmental law and early champion of the idea that nature has fundamental legal rights, who died at age 83.
- A new study shows that 20 companies, led by ExxonMobil and Dow, produce 55% of the world's single-use plastic waste, and Australia leads the world in per-capita generation of that waste, writes Sandra Laville at The Guardian.
- Canadian-owned ReconAfrica has reported a major oil strike in Namibia's sensitive Kavango region, worrying local residents and environmentalists, report Kai Nebe and Jana Genth at Deutsche Welle.
- Mongabay.com reports that Brazil's environment minister is under investigation for illegal timber exports, after surprise police raids May 19 on government offices led to the suspension of 10 high-level environmental officials.

Upcoming events:

Laudato Si' Week events continue in the coming days, with an update on a Vatican-sponsored program to provide safe water and sanitation to Catholic healthcare facilities and the official "soft" launch of the Laudato Si' Action Platform.

Also coming up: a time to reflect on how the earth is speaking to us and a discussion of farm and food worker rights.

You can find more information about these and other events on the EarthBeat Events page.

Closing beat:



EarthBeat seeds begin to bloom as wildflowers in the springtime. (Brittany Wilmes)

If you attended a Catholic conference in 2019 or early 2020 — back when such in-person gatherings were a thing — and happened by an NCR exhibitor booth, you might have picked up a packet of EarthBeat seeds.

NCR engagement editor Brittany Wilmes came across a packet not long ago and decided to see if the seeds would still sprout. Indeed, they did — and she passed along a photo of the in-bloom wildflowers to prove it. If you still have a seed packet, know that they may still be viable — and let us know if you've planted them.

The patch of green in Wilmes' garden is a springtime reminder that we are a people of hope — and that this long, dark tunnel in which the world finds itself will eventually give way to light.

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