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A student holds a poster at St. Conval's Primary School in Glasgow, Scotland, while learning a

A student holds a poster at St. Conval's Primary School in Glasgow, Scotland, while learning about climate change ahead of COP26, the U.N. Climate Change Conference, which starts Oct. 31. (CNS/Reuters/Russell Cheyne)



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With just days before COP26 begins, Catholic groups have prepared the priorities and expectations they will bring to Glasgow, Scotland, for the consequential United Nations climate change summit. And while Pope Francis won't join them in person, they are poised to carry his words into the negotiating halls on his behalf.

(CNS/United Nations)

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For more than two years, Catholic development agencies, religious congregations and the Vatican have been prepping for COP26 — a key meeting in the decadeslong international effort to limit the planet's rising temperatures. They say the conference of nearly 200 countries must commit to substantial, short-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to keep alive the Paris Agreement goals, as well as follow through on major funding for developing nations and signal an end to the era of fossil-fueled growth.

"[COP26] needs to be an inflection point in terms of the care of our common home," said Sr. Veronica Brand, U.N. representative for the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary. "It's still within our reach to do much to prevent the catastrophic, worst-scenario consequences of climate change."

Delayed a year by the coronavirus pandemic, COP26 (Oct. 31-Nov. 12) comes six years after the Paris Agreement and will be the first time since then that nations are expected to submit new climate pledges toward limiting average temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century.

So far, 114 countries and the European Union have submitted new plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The planet has already warmed roughly 1.1 C, and global actions are currently projected to result in a 2.7 C average temperature rise above preindustrial times. Each fraction of warming raises severity of extreme weather events and puts at risk the health and security of millions more people. Scientists have said to keep the 1.5 C target in sight, countries must cut emissions by at least 45% by 2030. A new U.N. report showed the production of fossil fuels, the main driver of climate change, actually increasing through 2040.

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"We need the commitments of member states that keep us below the 1.5 degrees and maximum 2 degrees," said Neil Thorns, director of advocacy for Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), the official overseas aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

After this story published, a CAFOD spokesperson clarified their position that countries must limit warming to no more than 1.5 C.

Catholics have joined with many NGOs and civil society groups in making the 1.5-degree target a top priority for COP26.

In early October, Pope Francis convened an unprecedented Vatican gathering, where leaders of world's religions signed a joint appeal addressed to negotiators at COP26, urging them to act soon to keep the 1.5 C trajectory in reach.

"Now is the time for urgent, radical and responsible action. Transforming the present situation requires the international community to act with greater ambition and fairness, in all aspects of its policies and strategies," stated the faith appeal, which Francis handed to Alok Sharma, the British diplomat who is president of COP26.

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Many had expected that Francis would also deliver his words directly to heads of state in Glasgow. For months, reports circulated that the pope would make a one-day trip to Scotland to attend the leaders summit at the start of COP26. But the Vatican announced Oct. 8 that Cardinal Pietro Parolin, secretariat of state of the Holy See, would lead their delegation and the pope would not attend.

Alistair Dutton, director of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) and part of the Holy See delegation, said the decision left Scottish Catholics feeling "gutted."

"It's an enormous disappointment for everyone who had hoped that Pope Francis would inspire world leaders to really grasp the nettle and tackle the climate emergency," he said in a statement.

Dutton and others who spoke to EarthBeat said that the pope's attendance at the COP, which has never happened before, would have signaled the seriousness of the climate situation, and set a clear moral tone at the outset of the two-week proceedings. It might have supported the necessary moral courage for leaders to act with ambition equal to what the science says is needed, they said.

Related: Pope should send Greta Thunberg to COP26 in his place

Negotiators and others present at COP21 in Paris said the interventions of faith leaders, including Pope Francis through his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," played a role in the eventual adoption of the Paris Agreement.

Francis is still likely to send a message, perhaps by video, to COP26. And Catholics who will be on the ground plan to amplify his calls to action.

"Pope Francis is clear where he stands on these issues, there's no doubt … but we have to make sure that the words he would have said, and he has said in many, many places, continue to reverberate around the halls," Dutton told EarthBeat.

Financing to developing nations

Along with the 1.5-degree target, Catholics and other faith groups have stressed that COP26 must also deliver on long-promised financing to help developing nations reduce emissions and respond to existing consequences of climate change.

In 2011, countries established the Green Climate Fund, which sought to mobilize $100 billion annually by 2020 toward developing nations to aid their climate efforts. But only approximately $79.6 billion has been committed to date.

President Joe Biden in September pledged to double the U.S. contribution to $11.4 billion annually by 2024. COP26 will also be the first climate summit with the U.S. recommitted to the Paris Agreement after former president Donald Trump exited the accord.

Faith groups have urged that the financing be an even split between mitigation (reducing emissions) and adaptation measures (building resilience to present and future climate impacts). Another major piece of financing is the issue of loss and damage, where people, communities or countries receive compensation for climate impacts, such as droughts and flooding, they've already suffered.

"If you live on a Pacific island that is now sinking beneath the waves, you can't adapt. You need compensation for what is lost, so that you can move somewhere else and start again," Dutton said.

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>
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The joint faith appeal directly called for nations to address loss and damage, and CIDSE, a network of Catholic development agencies, has made it a topline priority in their COP26 policy demands, calling for $75 billion annually by 2023.

The concept has been controversial, said Cecile Kern, global policy and research advocate with Mercy International Association, not only because of the financial liability it poses, but because it is a recognition that mitigation and adaptation measures have failed.

Mercy International Association is among those petitioning COP delegates to elevate loss and damage to the same status as mitigation and adaptation, which would mean countries would be required to discuss it at the annual summits and commit to addressing it.

"There's a lot of civil society momentum on it, and we're going to try and get those messages as strongly as we can," Kern said.

Other priorities that CIDSE and other Catholic groups outline include:

- A sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- A just energy transition that ends fossil fuel subsidies immediately while providing necessary support to the industry's workers and developing countries;
- Guidelines for agriculture-based climate action, with an emphasis on agroecology;
- Completing Paris rulebook, which stipulates what countries can count in devising emissions reductions, with a focus on actual reductions versus "net zero" offsets;
- Adding human rights protections to the rulebook.



Pope Francis greets Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 17, 2019. (CNS photo/Yara Nardi, Reuters)

Will climate frontlines be represented?

The pope isn't the only person whose absence may be felt at COP26.

The coronavirus pandemic has put in question how much representation civil society groups will have in Glasgow, particularly from countries on the frontlines of climate change.

The continuing scourge of COVID-19 in many parts of the world and limited access to vaccines has made traveling to COP26 challenging for some and impossible for others. The U.K. government has sought to alleviate some of the hurdles and is

requiring participants to receive a negative COVID test within two days of arriving.

Numerous Catholic development agencies have also worked with their partners overseas to obtain visas and in several cases are bringing representatives from the Global South to COP to speak at their events. In meetings with the U.K. government, CAFOD has encouraged them to ensure civil society groups have as much access as possible.

Thorns said civil society groups play a critical role at COP through support of some of the climate vulnerable countries that have small delegations, but also in maintaining grassroots pressure on negotiators to deliver results.

"It just reminds the negotiators that there is a whole world out there, rather than a whole world of just words in front of them," he said. "That actually what they're talking about is people's real-life experience, and it makes a huge difference."

Related: UK faith leaders issue common declaration ahead of COP26

The Climate Justice Alliance, an international network of frontline communities, will have a delegation in Scotland and is helping mobilize demonstrations set for Nov. 6.

In the runup to COP26, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas assembled a climate and water task force with members from Argentina, Australia, Cambodia, Ireland, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and the U.S. The conversations formulated the position statement they will seek to convey to delegates.

But getting to Glasgow is only part of the challenge. Finding a place to stay has proven as difficult. Scotland's largest city has seen accommodations booked for months, and those that are available have often come at soaring prices.

To alleviate that burden, SCIAF has worked with climate groups in Scotland to set up a non-profit housing network to offer homes, spare rooms, office space and other facilities to summit attendees.

Lorna Gold, board chair of the Laudato Si' Movement and a Glasgow native, has spent the weeks before COP26 pairing attendees with family and friends in the area.

"It's amazing that families from the Catholic Church and faith communities are opening their doors," she said.

Groups like SCIAF have animated Catholic parishes and schools in Scotland to take actions within their own communities ahead of COP26. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, COP26 prayer cards have been distributed to all Catholic parishes in England and Wales.

After a slow buildup of two years of preparations, Scotland is hoping a successful summit can pave the way for a more rapid global response to an acceleratingly warming world.

"Can we make those changes quickly enough?" Dutton said. "Because we know that the next decade is will be decisive in terms of whether we do manage to stay below 1.5 degrees."

Read this next: 5 reasons why Catholics should care about the COP26 climate summit
This story appears in the **COP26 Glasgow** feature series. View the full series.