Justice



Participants in the All Saints' Day solidarity fast organized by Catholic Climate Covenant and the Ignatian Solidarity Network visit climate hunger strikers outside the White House in Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of Josh Burg)

by Melissa Cedillo

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Seeing her brother sitting in a wheelchair in front of the White House day after day, declining all food and most liquids, Karen Campion felt worried, but also proud of him.

"It is incredibly difficult to watch your little brother go on a hunger strike," Campion, 32, who lives in Rockville, Maryland, told EarthBeat. "It's been a high stress time for our family."

Her brother, Paul Campion, 24, and four other young climate activists from the Sunrise Movement began a hunger strike Oct. 20, calling for President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats to keep their pledge to include strong climate action in domestic spending bills before Congress. Paul Campion held a sign that read, "Hunger striking for my future children."

He broke his fast Oct. 30, after 11 days, because of health complications, and the others suspended the hunger strike Nov. 2, a day after Biden announced at the U.N. climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland, that the United States would achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. In a tweet, they said, "Today, we end our strike. But our survival still depends on Joe Biden and other Democrats like him."

The day before the strike ended, the action by Campion and the other strikers inspired more than 250 people to join a 24-hour All Saints' Day solidarity fast organized by Catholic Climate Covenant and the Ignatian Solidarity Network.

Participants pledged to fast from sunrise Nov. 1 until sunrise Nov. 2. Some posted videos on social media explaining why they were taking part.

In her message of solidarity with her brother, Karen Campion drew a connection between migration and climate change.

"I work with children, many of whose families have migrated from Central America, and I don't want them to become refugees again," she said.

Jesuit Br. Mark Mackey of Loyola University Chicago said he was fasting in solidarity with Paul Campion, an alumnus of the university, as well as other fasters, those gathered for the COP26 U.N. climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland, and "with

Jesus, who showed us in his time on Earth that fasting was a good way of using our bodies prayerfully."

Besides fasting, participants in the day of solidarity were also encouraged to lobby their legislators on climate action, especially the measures that triggered the hunger strike.

A $1 trillion infrastructure and jobs bill has passed the U.S. Senate but still faces a vote in the House of Representatives, while opposition from two Democratic senators is holding up a vote on a $1.75 trillion budget reconciliation bill that includes around $550 billion for climate-related measures.

Organizers of the solidarity fast said that during the day, 61 people reported having called their congressional representatives, with many saying it was the first time they'd ever done so. The Ignatian Solidarity Network is organizing another day of virtual advocacy Nov. 16.

In Washington, D.C., Paul Campion joined other Catholics who showed up at the White House during the fast to express support for the remaining hunger strikers, singing songs, presenting roses and praying together.

"These young people are really steadfast in their pursuit for justice," said Franciscan Br. Cristofer Fernández, a conservation biologist and climate justice coordinator for Catholic Climate Covenant, who visited the hunger strikers.

Molly Sutter, 24, who lives at Bethlehem Farm, a Catholic community in southern West Virginia, was among those who joined the solidarity fast.

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For her, the hunger strike and the fast hit close to home, as Sen. Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, historically a coal mining state, is one of the two holdouts on the budget reconciliation bill and has strongly opposed some of the measure's climate provisions.

Sutter, whose team works with people in the local community to promote renewable energy and other sustainable practices, hopes the political negotiations will result in robust climate policy and investment in green energy and green jobs.

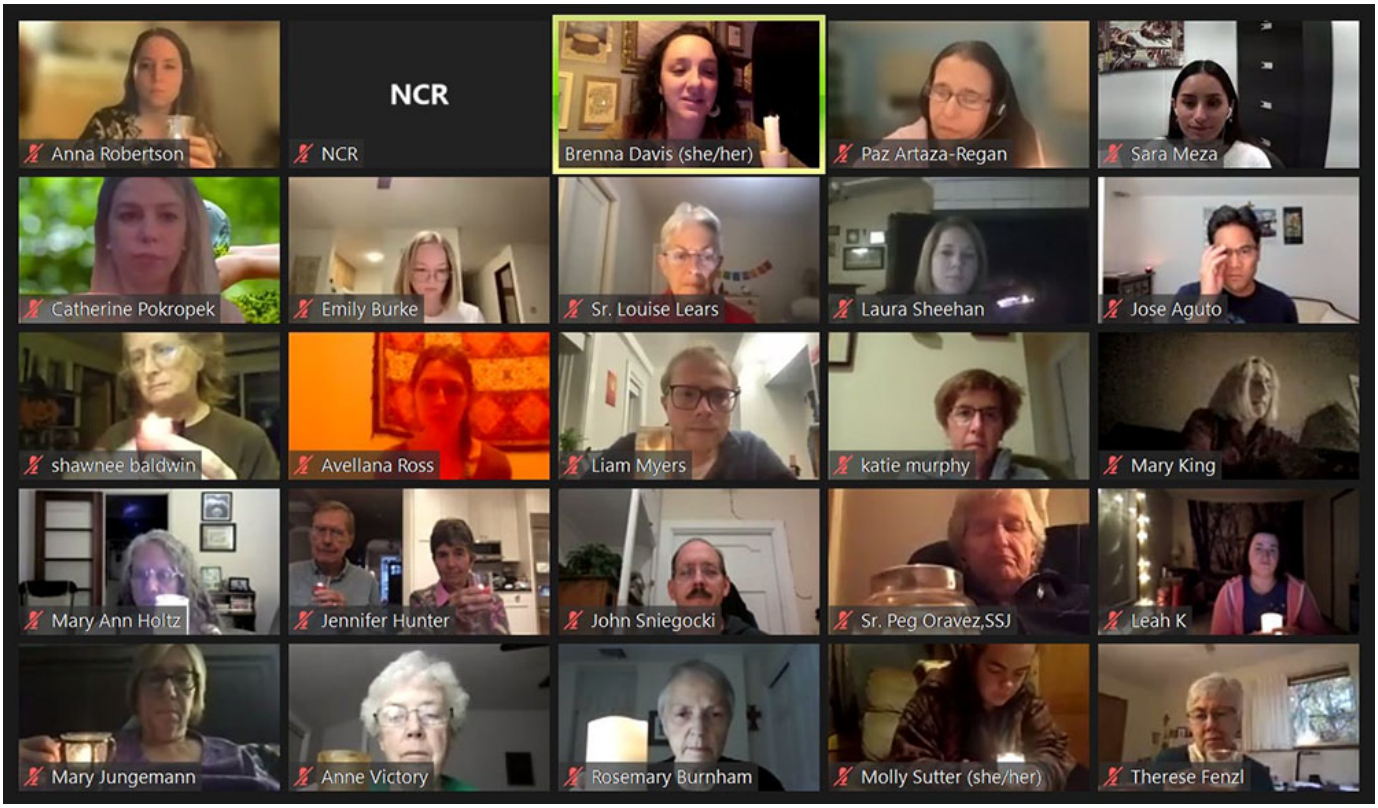
"There's so much exploitation in how we get energy. All [the] wealth [from mining] leaves this place," said Sutter, who believes it is possible to create jobs that ensure dignified conditions for workers.

In the evening of Nov. 1, more than 100 people who were participating in the solidarity fast gathered virtually to pray and reflect.

"These young people are literally putting their bodies on the line. Today, we followed these young adults," Anna Robertson, director of youth and young adult mobilization for Catholic Climate Covenant, said as she opened the vigil.

"To hold vigil is to wait — to wait steadfastly, to wait solemnly," she said. "We are waiting for an end to needless suffering. We are waiting for an end to cycles of dominance and oppression."

Those gathered for the virtual event prayed for the hunger strikers and for those with power to protect "the common home." The vigil ended with song and a litany of saints.



On the evening of Nov. 1, more than 100 people who planned to participate in the solidarity fast gather virtually to pray and reflect. (EarthBeat screencap)

Sara Meza, a student at San Diego State University who is a member of the San Diego Diocese's creation care ministry, offered a prayer for "those in the halls of power, that the heart might be transformed, that they might take bold action to protect our common home."

The 24-hour fast coincided with the gathering of around 120 heads of state for a two-day leaders' summit at the start of COP26. Pope Francis sent a message to the summit, urging the heads of state to stop delaying the measures needed to stem global warming, while faith groups descended on Glasgow to press for bold climate action and for climate justice, especially for those already suffering from the impacts of global warming.

For Karen Campion, there is no question that her brother is leading her family to fight for climate justice.

After the virtual vigil, she said she sees her brother's hunger strike as a logical step in the development of his commitment to climate justice, from working to reduce his individual climate footprint to taking a public stand on the global climate crisis.

Campion said she was moved to tears during the virtual vigil, especially by prayers for the species and ecosystems that already have been lost and the people, especially the most vulnerable, whose lives have been upended by a warming climate.

While climate action has both political and scientific dimensions, only a spiritual dimension can "capture the enormity of this period we are in," she said. "It's sort of beautiful that we are doing this on All Saints' Day."

[Editor's note: This story has been updated to correct the date of the Ignatian Solidarity Network virtual advocacy day.]

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